

CONFORMITY: VISUAL REFLECTION ON THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL
LIFE OF NGUNI WOMEN

by

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DECLARATION

I declare that **CONFORMITY: VISUAL REFLECTION ON THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE OF NGUNI WOMEN**, is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

.....

FEBRUARY 2015

DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to my dad, Mqokeni Ntombela, who once said to me “I wish you to study until you can see holes in the elbows of your jacket so that you will never be like, *umapendane*, a painter”. This is for you, dad.

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Finally, thank you to my children: to samke, who i competed with as i worked to finish my research proposal while he was doing his n4, and to nana, manto, mihle and yibas for not asking when daddy was coming home again.

TITLE:**CONFORMITY: VISUAL REFLECTION ON THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE OF NGUNI WOMEN****SUMMARY**

This study is a reflection on the culture and social life of Nguni women. The research is the interpretation and representation of how the Nguni culture and social values emerge as source of identity not a simple act of conformity. The manifestation of cultural values is presented through a body of artworks. The artworks seek to expose the complex nature of deep social bonds. These bonds are responsible for the creation of the ultimate value of aesthetic experience within a social and ethical context. The analysis addresses the significance and symbolic nature of traditional wedding rituals in relation to conformity and social identity. Various concepts and themes are discussed to ascertain how participating in these social and cultural performances helps individuals to pursue their own understanding and meaning of their experience within their lived environment.

The main question this study addresses is how women make sense of their experience as mothers, wives, members of society and individuals. It is the study of cultural and social phenomena; their nature and meanings, and the focus is on the interpretation of the phenomena in terms of their individual experiences and how they relate lived experience to their identities. This is done by acknowledging the essence of meaningful nature of experiences that lead participating individuals into conformity and submission.

Sculptural installation and performance are used to describe concepts in the production of visual presentation of this research. The visual installation in this research provides the symbolic meaning of nature of aesthetic experience which influences individual to connect with the society and thus

creating impression of conformity. The reflection on cultural and social experience highlights the dilemma of containing conformity to an act of coercion while leaving the issue of human perception and understanding of value in relation to the experience of the body unattended. A phenomenological approach to this study has helped to address art installation as a stylistic phenomenon that is created and experienced visually in order to represents a relationship between artist and society.

LIST OF KEY TERMS:

Womanism, African Feminism, Ubuntu, Conformity, African ethics, phenomenology, culture.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This study explores social circumstances of modern, married Nguni women who juggle the roles as working women and being a mothers, while still expected to fulfill traditional cultural roles. The study does not intend to promote the “rejection of marriage and motherhood”, but rather it highlights some of the “expectations, which surround women's identity, particularly in relation to marriage and motherhood” in a modern, yet traditional, African context (Hadjitheodorou 1999:9). It is anticipated that the knowledge generated from this inquiry will offer new insights and information on the reason for the hybrid existence of modern and traditional cultural practices in the lives of some Nguni modern women. It further presents a variety of visual narrative in an effort to interpret some of the rituals associated with traditional marriage which have been sustained from time immemorial and are still valued during the modern times.

1.1. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

A common foundation for a cultural practice is that a constitutive part of any culture is its heritage such as the visible symbols, behaviours and shared cultural knowledge of its members. Cultural Heritage include tangible and intangible ways of living developed by a community and passed on from generation to generation, and include social behaviours, practices, objects, and values (ICOMOS, 2002).

Culture consists of the structurally patterned ways of living, identifiable in institutional forms and in everyday behaviour as well as in such more recognizably cultural forms such as art, literature and music through which individuals and groups or individuals in groups characteristically respond to and make meaningful the circumstances in which they are placed by virtue of their position in society and in history (Clarke, J., Hall, S., Jefferson, T. & Roberts, B. 1981).

As Clarke et al (1981) indicate that there is a basis for believing that a

structured way of living exists in the form of a particular behaviour, which is defined as culture. The existence of this behaviour can be confirmed by exploring the visible symbols that are present in Nguni cultural artefacts, such as traditional music and attire, and particular behaviours that indicate social status, such as community Chief, and by reflecting on cultural knowledge that may originate from community history, such as marriage customs and attire. Therefore, this definition by Clarke et al. (1981) provides the basis for a structurally patterned way of living that constitutes the definition and the existence of a behaviour that is described as “culture”. Further analysis of this definition by Clarke et al. also provides a better understanding of how this structurally patterned way of living is attained, adopted, commemorated and maintained by the next generation:

The aim of analysis, given in this definition, is that reading through documentary or textual forms which such cultures leave behind as their sediment expressions, their records to posterity, in order to reconstitute as closely as possible, the structure of feeling, the patterned ways of thinking, feeling and living shared by individuals in similar circumstances which originally lay behind or supported such forms (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson & Roberts 1981).

Clarke et al (1981). use the phrase “sediment expressions” to describe the product that is formed by cultural life. “Sediment” is a geological term that refers to “particulate matter that is carried by water or wind and deposited on the surface of the land or the seabed, and may in time become consolidated into rock” (Oxford Dictionaries online). In other words, the identifiable patterns in which older generations conducted themselves in their daily lives leave behind traces of life that constitute what Clarke et al. (1981) define as the adoption and maintenance of culture.

The inclusion of the word “sediment” in Clarke et al.’s (1981:41) description of culture, further strengthens their argument that culture is the outcome of a “distinctive ‘way of life’ of the group..., the meaning, values and ideas

embodied in institutions, in social relations, in systems of beliefs, in ... customs, in the use of objects and materials". "People are moulded by culture from the moment of birth, and probably even before that, due to the cultural prescriptions for pregnancy and birth, and the expectations that people have about the child" (Delaney 2004:10-11). Therefore, it is expected that Nguni culture is responsible for moulding future generations. The question is how significant traditional Nguni culture is to modern society. What traces of Nguni cultural heritage can be associated with the behaviours observed in the life of married modern Nguni women of today? This research unpacks the social relations of African women, looking at Western cultural influences on African traditional values. The research goes into detail, looking into prominent African writers such as Kalawole (1998), Sofola (1988), Chukukere (1998), Aidoo (1986) and Hudson-Weems (1998) to study their opinion on social relations and African customs. A number of African social and cultural concepts, such as Ubuntu, African womanism, conformity and African feminism are also discussed in detail in chapter two.

1.1.1. The Nguni culture

Nguni people form part of the rich Southern African cultural heritage of tribes that are moulded by their culture and whose understanding of the living world originates from cultural orientations, as indicated in Figures 1.1; 1.2 and 1.3. Delaney (2004) describes orientation as a programme that assists an individual in feeling at home and in acclimating to a new environment, and also as representing an initiation ritual that introduces an individual to his/her new social status (2004:6). This cultural orientation may include the introduction of an individual to dining or eating manners. In Nguni culture, for example, different groups of people traditionally eat different types of food, so *umlenze* (the hind leg of an animal) is given to *izintombi* (young women), while *umkhono* (the front leg of an animal) is given to *izinsizwa* (young men) as part of the cultural practices found in most cultural events and ceremonies.

Therefore, this way of eating is a cultural practice that is constitutive to most Nguni people who practice it.



Figure 1.1: Swazi Cultural wedding (2015)



Figure 1.2: Ndebele women and children (2015)



Figure 1.3: Xhosa women singing and dancing in a cultural event

For Delaney (2004:15) “culture is a normative system that provides norms and rules of behaviour within a society”. The word “behaviour” echoes the ideas of Clarke (1981:410), as discussed earlier, who asserts that culture provides structurally patterned ways of living in everyday behaviour. Based on Clarke et al.’s (1981:410) statement, it can be concluded that, for many cultures, visually observed aspects form an integral part of the cultural identity. These visual aspects include cultural objects, dress codes, architecture and cultural behaviours associated with socio-economic status and diverse styles of living.

1.1.2. The Emancipation of Women

In her 1910 essay 'The tragedy of women's emancipation', the writer and political activist Emma Goldman, who lived and wrote during the height of the women's emancipation movement in the US, argues that “the main aim of the movement for the emancipation of women was to make it possible for women to be “human” in the truest sense” (Goldman 1969:237). Goldman (1969:237) argues against “artificial barriers that prohibit women’s desires for assertion, and against the activities that prevent women from reaching their fullest expression” echoing the views of Hume (1955:9) that human understanding and the origin of ideas come through sentiment and sensuality. Goldman calls for the equal treatment of human beings regardless of their gender, since both men and women have equally inherited the understanding of the world through the same feelings and desires. However, she does not consider access to the means of economic “production” to be the most important way to define the emancipation of women, as does Watson-Franke (1985:1). Goldman instead describes women as natural human beings capable of taking care of themselves as the main motivation for unconditional access to the means of “production” in order to achieve the emancipation of women.

On the other hand, the foundation of the emancipation of women in an African

context is situated not on individuality or access to means of production, but in social formation. For example, when an African woman gets married, she is not only representing her own values, she also largely represents the pride of the whole community. "Marriage makes women susceptible to the patriarchal system and that they happily collude with this system at the expense of women's rights" (De la Rey, Mama & Magubane 1997:17-23). Tolerance of the patriarchal system by women in general forms the basis of the sensitive boundaries. It is in this context that I want to argue that, despite access to production and human rights issues, the emancipation of women has sensitive boundaries when it comes to an African social and cultural context. These boundaries are difficult to unlock because they are subjective in nature.

If women are happy to collude with the patriarchal system, does that not mean that they are free to do so? In the African tradition, for example, the idea of a marriage proposal is different from Western culture, where the proposal involves only two people. In the African tradition, when a man proposes to marry a woman, he uses phrases such as "*umama unesizungu ekhaya udinga umakoti ozomhlalisa*" meaning, "my mother is lonely and she needs a companion" or "*Ntombazani ndifuna uyokusakhela ikhaya labantwana bethu*", meaning "Young Lady I want you to come and build a home for our family".

Therefore, from the initial stages of the communication between man and woman, it is expected that a woman will not only serve her husband, but his whole family as well. There is no objection from the woman because she understands that her identity is located within the social value system. Her acknowledgement as *umfazi wangempela* (a true woman) and the related honour that is bestowed upon her can only come from colluding with accepted family or social norms, which also form part of the society's identity.

I am not going to argue against the fact that “contemporary patriarchies in Africa constrain women and prevent them from realizing their potential beyond their traditional roles as hard-working income generating wives and mothers” (Salo 2001:60), but I would like to point out that, rather than offering women relief from total oppression, in actual fact, the expectations related to the emancipation of women have put extra strain on them by adding more duties they are expected to carry out. I have noticed this experience in my own family. My wife is expected to run and contribute (with her presence) to both families’ (hers and mine) activities, such as funeral arrangements, family weddings, church activities, traditional rituals, and communal societies/ *stokvels*. Over and above all she still excels in her core duties as family manager and career woman. My wife’s traditional roles as an African married woman will not cease to exist just because she is a career woman. If she fails to perform these expected community duties, she will be denounced as not being *umfazi wempela* (a true woman) by other women in the society. My wife as a modern African woman is expected to be sophisticated, yet flexible enough to balance and multi-task the other demands from the traditional culture. Like my grandmother, she is expected to be the source of strength for her children and a passionate lover to her husband as well as play role in the communal chores.

In this study I want to acknowledge and pay tribute to Nguni women in particular who have excelled in all traditional and modern life expectations. This study is intended to be a celebration of their success as both wives and mothers. This is done by reflecting on my upbringing by both my grandmother and my mother, as well as observing my wife as a married woman. The reason for doing this study is to honour these amazing and multi-tasking individuals.

The challenge in a study of this nature is to understand the sensitivity of the subject and be able to defuse tensions between those seeking to promote the emancipation of women and those who see it as an intrusion into African cultural and social customs. In order to seek consensus in this subject, I have applied Habermas's theory of "communicative action" (Habermas 1985:20). Habermas considers aesthetic expression to be made up of three communication processes: "truth", which refers to having a good reason to believe; "rightness", which refers to the morals that justify the reason for belief; and "truthfulness", which refers to the normative expression that reflects authenticity (Ingram 1991; Hillar 2003). Habermas (1985:20) argues that "a work validated through aesthetic expression can promote the acceptance of precisely those standards according to which it counts as an authentic work".

This means that a true reflection of honesty in the words spoken is found in the presentation of a person's identity. For example, a person may use the Nguni language to lead people to believe that he/she is an Nguni person, but the authenticity of his/her claim can only be judged if that person displays an aesthetic expression of the Nguni culture. These aesthetic expressions are ritual practices such as rite of passage, language, dance, singing, poetry and dressing in the Nguni traditional colour combination that is in accordance with his/her class and gender. These arts "transform the African by making him [sic] adopt his traditional cultural heritage in which he realizes his authentic personal selfhood among others in his community" (Egbujie 1977:144). True self-emancipation is located in the comfort of one's cultural heritage, which includes tangible and intangible attributes where authentic personal selfhood is celebrated among others within a community in order to preserve the cultural uniqueness for the benefit of future generations. This social paradox touches the nerve that borders between those who argue against the retention of cultural patriarchy as a means of oppression and those who

promote and commemorate cultural heritage as part of their identity. For this reason, the theory of communicative action is crucial to understanding this debate without being consumed by the subjectivity or objectivity of defining the emancipation of women by either side of society.

1.2. RATIONALE

The liberation of women is a fundamental necessity for the revolution, the guarantee of its continuity and the precondition for its victory. The main objective of the revolution is to destroy the system of exploitation and a new society which releases the potential of human beings, reconciling them with labour and with nature. This is the context within which the question of women's emancipation arises (President Samora Machel, 1973, in Newitt 1995:548).

In this context, one has to bear in mind the African social complexity of the relationship between political emancipation and cultural emancipation as a way of practicing cultural freedom. It is common knowledge that Africa as a continent has been politically and culturally colonised by Western countries for centuries. In chapter 2, the two issues of political and cultural emancipation are discussed in relation to the conceptual meaning of Western Feminism versus African Feminism and African Womanism. Former Mozambique President Samora Machel was convinced of the essential role women play in society when Frelimo (the Mozambican Liberation Front, of which Machel was a member) was formulating its revolutionary objectives in the late 1970s.

Let us unpack the statement “the essential role women play in society”. African women are known for their active participation and leadership in social events. Taiwo (2010) confirms that the leadership roles women have played in the development of various African societies cannot be underestimated (2010:230). Let us take wedding arrangements as an example of where the role played by women is not necessarily defined in terms of gender. In fact,

traditional African society attached no importance to gender issues because every individual had a role to play, both in the family and in the larger society (Taiwo 2010:230). It is common knowledge that the preparation of a traditional wedding ceremony is led by women who prepare food and serve the guests according to their status in community. Each role, regardless of who performs it, is considered equally important because it contributes to the fundamental goal of community survival (Taiwo 2010:230). Machel considered access to education and political freedom to be means by which the emancipation of women could be accomplished. Since then, other democratic movements such as the African National Congress (ANC) during the liberation of South Africa in 1994 have considered the role of women and women's emancipation to be a part of their political ideology. In addition, the South African Constitution guarantees rights, both economic and individual, for women in order to prevent their exploitation.

Although the emancipation of women in a South African context is designed to protect the rights of women, some African theorists such as Kolawole (1997) believe that the outright dismissal of all patriarchal belief systems advocated by Western feminist ideology appears to degrade some of the fundamental African value systems. Kolawole argues that "many issues highlighted in radical feminism would be seen as a perversion by many African women in the traditional setting, and that these women do have some positive avenues of self-liberation" (1997:28). It is within this framework that this research aims to define and critique the sensitive boundaries that constrain the emancipation of modern African women.

1.3. PERSONAL MOTIVATION

This investigation reflects on my personal view about the emancipation of women, particularly those women who have contributed to my understanding of their complex roles in society. These include, firstly, my late grandmother,

who would stop at nothing to make sure that we had food on the table and clothes to wear, and that our house was warm and pleasant; and, secondly, my wife, who juggles the roles of being a mother to our children, a wife to me, a woman in our society, and an individual person in her own right. Despite the chaos and complexity of her duties, she still enjoys a sense of womanhood, caring and honesty.

The women who belong to the category that my wife and my grandmother belong to display a high level of flexibility, are expected to manage more than one household, looking after their parents and their in-laws, as well as running their own households. In addition to this, modern women also have a career, which adds more demands to their existing roles. The role of an African married woman today demands the ability to adapt and to balance her life within the complex environment of the modern world. On top of that, she is also expected to attend other occasions, such as funerals and weddings, and to attend to the needs of her neighbours. These tasks require both a lot of energy and the ability to multi-task, and these attributes are what identify these women in their communities.

The wedding theme in this research represents the transition of a single woman into a married woman. A bride is expected to bring to a groom's family a wedding kist (*imbokisi lomshado*) as a symbol of a real woman (*ungumakoti wempela*). As a woman who is part of modern society, she is also expected to put food on the table and to look after her husband, her children, her parents and her in-laws. The modern world is as stressful as a marriage and, despite the stress of modern society women are still expected to keep the family intact. This study is a celebration of the role of women in contemporary life, especially as mothers and "producers of culture" (Deepwell 2010:4). Its aim is to reflect on how women "express their feelings and state their demands" in the social and cultural space without neglecting their talents and careers

(Borzello 2000:194).

1.4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

In traditional African society, the survival of the family and the future of marriage depended a great deal on the African woman. Thus, the African woman played a key role in the education and the teaching of children social, ethical and moral values which were part of the cultural standards for evaluating proper societal behaviour. Even in contemporary Africa where most women are now more equipped and empowered, the traditional care-giving, home-making and nurturing roles of women in the African family which formed the basis of their identity as wives and mothers are gradually been abandoned, as they have become increasingly involved in new roles and relations outside the home (Afisi 2010:229)

Contemporary South African women, like those throughout the rest of the African continent, are in search of their true cultural heritage and sense of identity. In his book *Heritage, culture and politics in the postcolony*, Herwitz (2012) confirms that South Africa is searching for its postcolonial identity. For Herwitz (2012), South Africa is a country in search of a narrative that can articulate and bind together the official states of culture and citizenry (2012:79). When Herwitz talks about South Africa, he refers to the South African people and their quest for identity, including Nguni women and their immediate culture, which are the central theme of discussion in this study. The study aims to describe the subjective nature of the social and cultural experiences of mothers and wives as members of both traditional and contemporary society.

This study also explores the works of two South African women artists – Mary Sibande, a sculptor and photographic artist, and Nandipha Mntambo, a sculptor – who address the same topic: honouring multiple, important roles some particular women, and African women in general have played in their lives. Furthermore, the study attempts to analyse how these artists have

contributed to contemporary art discourse through their art making. Sibande and Mntambo have managed to break the bonds of social and cultural conditioning and have become exceptional artists within their own societies. The selection of these artists is based on their relevance to this study, especially how they use their body forms and experience to create visually, through art installations, the meaning of their experiences. Installation art's space takes us from the creation and transformation of place to intervention and inhabitation, and this approach, according to Ran (2009), connects to phenomenology as it relates to the experience of the body (Ran 2009:2).

The research analyses the social ideologies, visual objects and cultural knowledge that these artists have used to shape the new identity of a modern woman. These areas of social relations are discussed in relation to the visual reflection of the country's contemporary visual artists. Nandipha Mntambo is a young female contemporary artist who is known for using cow hide to explore the shape of a female body. Mary Sibande dresses her own body in a combination of artificial Victorian dress and a house maid's uniform. She explores the constructions of class and gender while expressing the existence of sophistication in her own life experience. The combination of clothes such as Victorian dress and maid's uniform provides a rare reflection of the artist's own historical and personal life experience, focusing on the Post-Apartheid period. This research acknowledges their achievements as women artists, focusing on the conflicts and constraints they encounter in contemporary society, and seeks to bring about cultural and social change that would eliminate the causes of alienation and male dominating behaviour (Thomas 2010: 299).

1.5 PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

Set within the phenomenological approach this study aims to find meaning in the experience of being a married woman and the existence of traditional

culture in modern Nguni society. This is done first by observing the personal worlds of my wife and relatives in order to understand modern married women's life experiences. This approach involves detailed examination of the participants' life worlds; it endeavours to explore personal experiences and is concerned with these individuals' personal perceptions as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009:53). In other words, the research methodology is qualitative as it concerns itself with the meaning and understanding of the traces of cultural expressions in the life world of the participants, and also seeks to gain a deeper understanding of what it feels like to be a modern married Nguni woman.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) describes phenomenology "as a study of essences, including the essence of perception and the essence of consciousness", (1962: vii). Phenomenology tries to give a direct "description of our experiences as they are, without taking into account the psychological origins and causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the sociologist may be able to provide (Merleau-Ponty 1962: vii).

As discussed earlier, Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009:54) emphasise the word "understanding" and give the context of this word and why it is important to deliver the main objective of the enquiry. The ordinary word 'understanding' usefully captures these two aspects of interpretation-understanding in the sense of "identifying or empathizing with and understanding as trying to make sense of" (Smith et al., 2009:54). They further argue that phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of experience and that it provides a rich source of ideas about how to examine and comprehend lived experience (Smith et al., 2009:11).

The phenomenological approach in this study is used to understand, from a

man's perspective, how married women experience the multiple roles that are brought by their extended families and their immediate, modern culture. The study makes reference to the Nguni culture, with special focus on the Xhosa and Zulu ethnic groups. The women who are the subject of this study are those who are presumed to be loyal to African traditional culture and at the same time aspire to be renowned corporate or modern women.

1.6 INTRODUCTION TO THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study the researcher interprets and presents the efforts made by modern African women who have to adjust their lives constantly due to the distinct dress codes associated with their multiple social roles by performing masquerading in my artwork. The term “masquerading” is not used to ridicule these women’s efforts, but to honour their resilience as extraordinary human beings. The term “masquerading” comes from Riviere (1986), who defines “womanliness as masquerading” (1986:38). She states that “womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, to hide the possession of masculinity” (Riviere 1986:38). The interpretative phenomenological approach and the term masquerading have been chosen to facilitate the analysis of data about the life experiences of these Nguni women, to articulate how they achieve a balance between work and family obligation, and still remain content.

1.6.1 Pain and Pleasure, Sublime and Beautiful

The use of the interpretative phenomenological approach and the term “masquerading” seeks to demonstrate the pleasure associated with these women’s behaviour using the concepts of “pain and pleasure” and “sublime and beautiful” (Burke 2009:30). The concept of the “sublime is primarily concerned not with works of art but with how a particular experience of being moved impacts the self” (Ryan 2001:265). In this case, the research explores how Nguni women experience their culture and how the significance and

magnificence of the cultural practices or rituals impact them. Ryan explains that for Burke, the sublime is a “question not of the subject’s increasing self-awareness, but of the subject’s sense of limitation and of the ultimate value of that experience within a social and ethical context” (Ryan 2001:266). In reference to Burke’s theory, Nguni cultural practices are valuable than anything else to those who follow tradition and its experience provides a sense of belonging to the Nguni people. According to Burke (2009:52), the ultimate value of the results of a particular experience is “astonishment”, which is the “effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence and respect”. This concept can be compared to a person who has fallen in love with the person of his/her dreams, the effect of sublime is the high degree of love, which is followed by effect of adoration. “When we encounter an image that appears sublime — a sublime image — it seems to reach out to us and, once it has taken hold, does not so easily let go” (Goble 2013:86). What Goble describes above appears in the same line of reaction as love that appears sublime as it reaches out and takes hold of us and does not let go easily. It can also be said in relation to cultural practice. One may fall in love with a particular traditional ritual that take hold of us and we cannot let it go because we have found self (identity) in that practice, whether it is dancing, singing or acts of cultural masquerading. To put it differently, being a Zulu male is not a matter of choice or cultural identity, but it has been part of my self-discovery and I cannot let it go easily.

1.6.2 The Theory of Liminality

The theories applied in this study support the view that the emancipation of women can be said to be subjective and that it is influenced by the culture to which the woman pay allegiance. In describing the influence of culture, I will borrow Victor Turner’s “liminal theory” in relation to certain rituals that are performed by women in preparation of their rite-of-passage to married life. Turner (1982) distinguishes three phases that bring about the process of

liminality: “separation, transition and incorporation” (1982:24). The term “Being in between” is derived from this theory as it describes the period between pre- and post-ritual practice. The separation phase provides a ritual stage where the participants are stripped of their social status and taken into the transition where the participants are prepared for the incorporation stage where they are being accepted as part of the new social class (Turner 1982:25). In most cultures, a participant is given a new name as part of giving that person a new identity. In the Nguni culture, the practice called *ukungenisa*, which literally means “taking someone in”, is a traditional custom called *ukwamukelwa komakoti* (“accepting the bride”). This custom is composed of various ritual performances, including smearing the bride’s body with a mixture of the bile, blood and water from a slaughtered goat or sheep to symbolise their acceptance into the new family. This ritual process is also said to be an introduction of the newly wed to the ancestors, informing them of the addition member to the family.

1.7 MEDIA AND TECHNIQUES

The theme of my artwork is “*Awuthunyelwa gundane*”, which means that no one knows what kind of reception the bride will face when joining a new family. My premise is that nothing could describe the journey towards the emancipation of women better than the journey to a marriage and its rite of passage. In both cases, the emancipation of women and the journey of marriage, there are expectations of a particular freedom and the confirmation of a status as either a member of the community or as a wife.

In my artwork, I make use of the cultural settings of a kraal, performance and the bedroom to illustrate the customs that a bride is expected to comply with in order for her wedding to be accepted by the family, the ancestors and the community at large. Entering the kraal takes place in both families. Firstly, the bride enters her family kraal to report that she is leaving her family to join the

groom's family. Secondly, the bride also enters the groom's kraal to introduce her into her groom's ancestors.

The wedding kist represents a metaphor for female selfhood, a celebration of beauty, pride and a lack of shame. Wedding dresses will be used to represent flexibility, adaptability, versatility and a balance between traditional culture and modern life. Modern mothers are strong but yet flexible enough to adapt to any role required by their immediate environment. Women in modern society are working as career women and at the same time are raising their children as single mothers. The wedding kist drawers represent both cultural heritage and modern life where women are not shy to show class, style and the display of opulence.

The content of the modern wedding kist drawer will focus less on family and more on a woman and her personality, whereas the kist drawer of the traditional woman will pay more attention to the families involved, rather than highlighting the individual. In a traditional cultural wedding, the bride is responsible for the appearance and content of the wedding kist drawer since it should embody the ethos of her family. Therefore, preparing the wedding kist drawer is a balancing act that should not divide or create animosity between the new family members. Thus the selection of the wedding object in my artwork is intended to find a balanced space to introduce the emancipation of women without stepping outside of acceptable cultural and social boundaries.

The kist in my artwork represents tradition and heritage, and represents the rich cultural history of Nguni people. The artwork is in its traditional form, although done in modern materials such as plastics and found manufactured objects. The installation includes performance and the cultural setting that represents the rite of passage for a bride as she enters her new family

(groom's family). This art installation represents the aesthetic experience that I refer to earlier in my theory, which serves to authenticate the social and cultural identity. These objects constitute a significant part of the social and cultural value systems in Nguni traditions and customs. Braaten (1991:135) refers to the role of these aesthetic expressions as being responsible for bringing "harmonies of interest" or the "convergence for various cultures and societies", which is confirmed by Hillar (2003:6). The artworks are designed to portray how women collude with aspects of b the patriarchal systems that make them feel genuine about their identity.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides an overview of previous research on Western feminism, African feminism, African ethics and African womanism. It introduces the theoretical framework for this study, which comprises the main themes that seek to focus “on the total female experience of African women” in order to search for “a more authentic portrayal of the identity of women” by African female writers (Hadjitheodorou 1999:3). The main purpose of the literature is to review Western and African views on women’s identity. It looks at African women writers, and explores their definition of feminism in the African context. It also traces Western social events that led to the rise of feminist movements and how social events influence impact on the interpretation of feminism in the African context. This is done in order to describe events that lead to the misinterpretation of the conformity of women in the African social and cultural context. This chapter concludes with a discussion on phenomenological methodology and how the data which informed this study was obtained.

2.1. FEMINIST DEVELOPMENT: THE WESTERN PERSPECTIVE

This section investigates the development of Western social events during the eighteen century that led to the formation of feminist movements. Furthermore, the study uncovers early development of artistic or visual expression as parts of social construction. The study debates the relevance of artistic or visual expression in relation to social structures. The fundamental issues this chapter attempts to unpack are the causes that led to the emergence of feminist ideology. It further looks at early social representation of women in public spaces and tries to establish if those representations were informed by the then role of women in the society.

According to the 1949 essay “The second sex” by Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), a French writer, intellectual, existentialist philosopher, political activist, feminist and social theorist “a woman appears essentially to the male as a sexual being; for him she is sex, absolute sex, no less (de Beauvoir 2005:29). The question that this chapter tries to answer is, can the culture of visual representation of females in art from this period show us a different picture? Klein (1993) acknowledges that it is difficult to “separate the representation and objectification of women in visual images from social constructions of gender and sexuality” (Klein 1993:61). Harvey (2004) argues that the “female passive response which underpinned the claims that the new female roles in the eighteenth century were created by new forms of print culture” (2004:49). Mannheimer (2012) on the other hand puts the blame solely on the print media, especially satire. She argues that “the central project of the eighteenth century was to perform a kind of pedagogy on the reader by engaging the reader’s visual imagination, but also controlling the reader’s actual, immediate acts of looking and seeing, which, in turn, became the training ground for gaze” (Mannheimer 2012:1). In chapter four of his book entitled *Her whole power of charming: femininity, ugliness and the reformation of the male gaze*, Jones (1998) cites Reynolds’ exhibition and argues that in the exhibition of:

Portraits of high-born or beautiful women, the paintings were positioned not merely with reference to conventional display techniques, but in relation to a variety of discourses which commented on, or attempted to proscribe the social place of woman within eighteenth century (1998:153).

I concur with Jones’s statement when he brings in the concept of “male gaze”. It is evident that the display of gender and sexuality in the Boucher’s painting portraits not only the position of a woman in the social setting, but it exposes the rise of male gaze as indicated in Figure 2.1 which is consumed by mostly male readers.



Figure 2.1: Michaël Martin, Attribué à François Boucher, *L'Odalisque* (2007)

Bordo and Heywood (2004) also acknowledge that the female body is socially shaped and was historically a colonised territory (Bordo & Heywood 2004:21). This observation by Bordo and Heywood (2004) renders visual culture as a controlled exercise to manipulate the object (female) in order to believe that gender-based adoration is part of social culture and is natural. The visual narratives of the eighteenth century gave rise to the construction of gender identity, which populated male adoration of the female in public spaces such as museums and art galleries, and later in commercial magazines.

Narratives are constructions of reality using available cultural and social material , but ordering and presenting versions of this material in accordance with certain ideologies and constraints. Such literature is a powerful method of social control and can function as an important means of social change or its prevention (Wolf 1991:71)

Therefore, visual media becomes part of the society that shapes and control the presentation of female body. It decides how women should appear, either in art canvases or television visuals. Then, the adoration of women by men in

visual images, for example, turns the role of women into the fulfilment of man's desires. One of the early feminist activists in the eighteenth century who did not want to remain passive in the man's world was Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797). In her publication *Vindication of the rights of woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft argued that feminism "concerns itself with gaining equal political rights and economic opportunities for women" (Cudd & Andreasen 2005:7).

Wollstonecraft fought for the principles of equal education for both ordinary men and women. As much as she was not anti-men, she did not favour artificial sentiments by men which degraded women because they were mothers or wives. Wollstonecraft was critical of men's intellectual view that finds superficial strength in looking down on women and considers them as pleasing objects designed to subordinate. Since then, feminists have argued for women's equality on the grounds that "women have the same capacity for reason as men" (Cudd & Andreasen 2005:7). Wollstonecraft regretted the artificial prosperity promise that left the half of the nation made up of women to suffer under male domination. She argued in her writings that "as long as men continue to undermine women through ignorance and pride the equality in society and morality will never gain ground" (Wollstonecraft 2005:11). Wollstonecraft referred to morality as a "false refinement" (Wollstonecraft 2007:96) designed to cover for males' "self-interest" at the expense of goodwill (Kant 1952:65). In other words, morality is considered worthy when it confirms the conviction of men's power over others, including women. In describing otherness, de Beauvoir (2005:29) confirms this man's position by saying that "man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being".

Perry (1994:23) argues that:

[A]lthough many middle and upper class women in the eighteenth century had access

to learning and education, they were more easily transformed into seductive allegorical meanings, and such traditions have contributed to the historical association of femininity with masquerade or forms of false representation.

Wollstonecraft also lamented the “false system of education found in books written by men that considers females as rather women instead of human beings” (2007:95). The education system of that time left out the intellectual contribution of women while claiming to work towards the creation of an equal society. Wollstonecraft disputed this, calling it “an unjust society that is not properly organised” (Wollstonecraft 2005:12). She questioned the “failure of the society to oblige men and women to discharge their respective duties by making it the only way to obtain proper community tolerance” (Wollstonecraft 2005:11). She also queried the “vain expectation of virtue from women while they are still dependent of men with absolute support by hereditary properties” (Wollstonecraft 2005:11). It was difficult to understand how women could escape the treatment of being subordinate to their husbands without avoiding social alienation. It was also clear to Wollstonecraft that women had little choice in the laws that governed the physical world. Men’s degree of “physical superiority is a noble prerogative for men and it cannot be denied” laments Wollstonecraft (2007:96). Yet she questioned why, despite having physical superiority, “men continue to sink women even lower by rendering women as alluring objects when intoxicated by adoration under influence of their senses” (Wollstonecraft 2007:97).



Figure 2.2: Filippo Lippi, *Portrait of a woman with a man at a casement* (1406–1469).

The tendency to look at women as alluring objects is clear when one looks at early Renaissance painting, such as that shown in Figure 2.2, which Simons (1988) analyses in her essay. Simons disputes the notion that Renaissance art represents a “naturalistic reflection of a newly discovered reality” and argues that it is “a set of framed myths and gender-based constructions” (Simons 1988:4). In her argument, she analyses a number of portraits that were meant to be viewed by men. Simons argues that *Florentine* portraits, for example, were works by “male artists for male patrons primarily addressed to male viewers” (Simons 1988:8). She make an example of Filippo Lippi’s *Double portrait of a man and woman*, and notes that the woman’s coat has a

motto embroidered on the sleeves that vows “Loyalty” to the man (Simons 1988:10). “To be a woman in the world was/is to be the object of the male gaze: to 'appear in public' is 'to be looked upon’” wrote Giovanni Boccaccio quoted by Simons (1988:8).

There is no doubt that eighteenth century artistic portrayals of women, together with the male-dominated print media, were a prime source of the emergence of the feminist agenda. In the words of Stansell (2010:1) “men have dominated, ruled, lorded over, and subjugated women”.

The battle of the eighteenth century to replace a monarchical system with civilian government during the revolutions in France and America did not equate to women being entitled to freedom for having taken part in the revolutions. The subordination of women survived the American and French revolutions despite the fact that women participated in full force in these revolutions, writes Stansell (2010:3). It is true that history usually repeats itself, and the twenty-first century Arab spring uprising, especially in Egypt, repeated the ills of the past by not acknowledging the contribution of women to the uprising. Instead, women are now being abused by the same male patriots who fought side-by-side with women and men in the liberation struggle. In his 2012 *Times Live* article, Waguih notes that:

Women, who participated in the 18-day uprising that ended with Mubarak’s Feb. 11, 2011 ouster as leading activists, protesters, medics and even fighters to ward off attacks by security agents or affiliated thugs on Tahrir, have found themselves facing the same groping and assaults that have long plagued Egypt’s streets during subsequent protests in the square (Waguih 2012).

Both these revolutions continued in stable republics that stated the rights of men while acknowledging “women only as mothers not as sisters” (Stansell 2010:4) despite their participatory in the revolutions. Stansell (2010:4) argues that for centuries, women in Europe complained of the “indignities of being

subject to men” and their laments became “traditional women’s culture winding through songs and poems”.

The introduction of the ideas of modern Western civilisation did not improve the lives of women as “political authority was explicitly modelled on male authority in the family” Stansell (2010:5). Women continued to be the subject of constant correction first by their fathers and, once they assume marriage responsibilities, by their husbands. Women were constantly judged according to the ideas contained in the Biblical scripture of Adam and Eve, which presents women as “unruly [and] prone to wreck[ing] the divine order and women too [understand] things this way”, concludes Stansell (2010:5). This view makes it difficult for Western women to live outside of social norms as their social conduct and individual character is conceived, determined and controlled through politics, culture and religion. Nineteenth century British philosopher John Stuart Mill argued that the situation should change and be “replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privileges to either side of the sexes” (Mill 2005:17). He also stated that the principle which regulated the “existing social relations between two sexes is wrong and it is the chief hindrance to human improvements” (Mill 2005:17). This argument by Mill echoes the previous assertion by Wollstonecraft, who complained about an unjust society that was not properly organised as it did not compel men to respect women’s actions based on their respective duties.

Despite the introduction of Christianity around the world, men did not consider specific gender-based duties as a form of moral worth according to which people should be governed. Instead, humans were divided according to a divine plan, that “men are masters and any rebelling against this plan defies the will of God”, in the words of Stansell (2010:3). Makoro (2007) notes, that “there is still a lot of resistance in some churches to the idea of allowing women to be ordained as ministers or to preach the word of God” (Makoro

2007:56). Although in Europe men were using religion to oppress women, the situation was different in America. Women in America were revolting against the rules that prevented them (women) from preaching the word of God from the pulpit. "Ministries tried to contain them, devoting sermons and making rules, but their zeal forced church authorities to be flexible in interpreting the passages used for centuries to side line them" (Stansell 2010:31). Women argued that soul has no gender and "in Christ there is no male or female" (Stansell 2010:31). The new voice that women had found gave them enough ammunition to challenge the perception of women's weak character and lack of reason. American women became more conventional in their approach compared to their British counterparts. British women preferred "not to press the matter but hewed to charity work and deferred to male authority" (Stansell 2010:32). In America women were pursuing the ideology of brotherhood and sisterhood to make room for social cohesion between the two sexes within the church. Slogans such as "Your brother in Christ" or "Your sister in Christ" made it possible for men and women to work together in friendly relationships (Stansell 2010:32). In Britain, Mill was raising his voice on behalf of women, questioning the conception of the theory of inequality, which was never debated in public to test its fitness. Mill asserted that the inequality was not for the "benefit of humanity" (2007:112), and he was disturbed by the fact that "laws and systems of polity" preferred to recognise social relations by "converting physical fact (masculinity) into a legal right", that is, an equal right before the law (Mill 2007:112). This practice gave no recourse to women. The difficulty that Mill found in British society was that British women took a position of silence, compared to America. "Though there are not in this country, as there are in the United States, periodical conventions to agitate for the Right of Women, there is numerous and active society organised by women" Mill wrote (2007:113). Despite being a man himself, Mill, through his conviction, was taking a stand to promote women's independence from men.

He warned women not to accept the status quo that they had been brought up to obey and take orders, arguing that:

The masters of women wanted more than obedience, and they turned the whole force of education to affect their purpose. All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission and yielding to the control by others (Mill 2007:113)

Mill's observation echoes that of Wollstonecraft when she protested the fact that books get written by men so that they can gain control over the intellectual reason of women. Again, Wollstonecraft was calling for equal education amongst men and women which Mill also promoted in his plea for better education for women. It is quite clear that equal education was a point of contestation in the feminist agenda in the eighteenth century. Women in this period felt the need for better education so that they could have greater influence in the system that governed their society. Women noted that men used education to invent complex theories to justify their undignified treatment of women. Hooks (2005) also notes that not all women who joined the feminist movement did so because of victimisation; in fact, "housewives were bored with leisure, with the home, with children, with buying products, they actually wanted more out of life" and therefore, education was the only option that could take them away from this misery (Hooks 2005:60). Wollstonecraft put it more bluntly when she stressed that women "might study politics and reading history will be more useful than the perusal of romances" (Wollstonecraft 2005:15). Therefore, "events of the 1830s provided the basis for an understanding of woman as morally sovereign persons whose highest duties lay outside the family jurisdiction" confirms Stansell (2010:50).

Thus, the issues of inequality and a lack of education were among the conditions that contributed to the emergence of the feminist agenda. Feminists such as Wollstonecraft blamed the education system as the main

course of inequality. Firstly, the fact that because men are the only human beings associated with reason, women are therefore depicted as weak beings was ill conceived, according to Wollstonecraft. The absence of a contribution by women in the intellectual space continued to render them weak in the eyes of men. Their participation in the revolution was not enough to grant them the status of patriots. Women asked why they were being treated as less than human? In the end, they decided to read what men read and write about what men could never experience. The rise of feminist thought was . It was bound to happen because equality cannot be guaranteed if half of society does not have the right to a proper education.

2.2. CONFORMITY IN AFRICAN CULTURE

In the previous section, we saw how Western cultures were adapting to the demands brought by the women's rights movement. In this section, African culture and social relations will be discussed to establish the experiences of African women in society. It is impossible to define culture and leave out the product of cultural compliance that comes in the form of conformity. This section looks at different views that seek to explain the principles that underlie human actions, including conformity. This section is an "attempt to make an intellectual sense of, and then to critique, the subordination of women to men" (Cudd and Andreasen 2005:1). Firstly, it looks at the principles that persuade African women, unlike their Western counterparts, to react sympathetically to certain cultural value systems. Secondly, it discusses the additional women's roles that come with modern society. If African women are happy to accept certain patriarchal values, it is then worth finding and describing the principal factors that might be contributing to the manner in which they respond to patriarchal values. This research addresses the definition of conformity by borrowing the defining themes from social psychology.

The *Oxford dictionary of sociology* defines behavioural conformity as a “tendency to make one’s actions comply with prevailing norms, irrespective of one’s personal beliefs; distinct, therefore, from the full conformist who endorses norms and behaviour alike” (Scott & Marshall 2005:33). The other explanation used by Scott and Marshall is from Robert Merton’s *Social theory and social structures* (1968), which refers to conformity as the acceptance of cultural goals and the legitimate or approved means of achieving them (Scott & Marshall 2005:105). The latter definition does not use pressure or force compliance as a means to define conformity, but refers to conformity as an act of agreeable participation based on understanding what needs to be achieved.

There are two other themes that this study looks at to further address the definition and understanding of conformity. These themes are “normative influence on conformity” and “informative influence on conformity” (Lord 1997:534-538). According to Lord (1997:534), a normative influence on conformity occurs when people want to be liked and maintain social harmony. Sometimes people comply with the majority’s norms or standards for acceptable behaviour, whereas informative influence on conformity occurs because people want to understand and perceive reality correctly, they sometimes comply with and accept the majority’s norms or standards for acceptance behaviour (Lord 1997:536). In short, these two themes are centred on two goals. Normative influence on conformity concerns itself with being liked, whereas informative influence of conformity concerns itself with being right or correct. Lord (1997) notes in his research that people pursue at least two goals that are sometimes incompatible: they want to be both right and liked (1997:16). In his book *Deviant behaviour*, Alex Thio (1995) notes that our strong *bond* to society is responsible for people avoiding deviant acts. Thio (1995) identifies four ways individuals bond themselves to society; the first is *attachment* to conventional people and institutions; the second,

commitment to conformity; the third, *involvement* in conventional activities; and the last, *belief* in the moral validity of social rules (1995:39). In order to find the true meaning of these definitions, one ought to describe the manner in which human senses interact with the surroundings. Referring to views raised by a number of theorists who have considered the role of “senses” as an entry point for human understanding, this section describes principles that persuade women to behave comfortably, or that make them happy to act according to cultural systems. These theorists include Kant (1952:14), Hume (1952:451) and Locke (1952:96).

Kant agrees that human sentiments are a source of actions and the understanding of objects (hot or cold object), but when he developed his views further on morals, he took a different viewpoint. Kant, unlike Hume and Locke, believed that moral principles should originate from duty and not from fear or happiness in order for them to have genuine moral worth (Kant 2001:156). It is possible for humans to experience goodwill, which is a natural moral duty (Kant 2001:151-166). Therefore, our inner conscience should agree or disagree with our morals through objective reasoning if we trespass into immoral grounds. In the life world, how often will this conscience arise objectively to guide our reasoning? Does this mean that a woman agrees with or accepts cultural patriarchal sentiments because she naturally lacks morals? Why should she be ashamed if her actions came naturally from her authentic love of her role, and can we call her behaviour unnatural?

Back to the subject of senses, Hume argues that senses are responsible for attaining knowledge and that morals derive their existence from taste and sentiments (Hume 1955:195). If a person experiences pain, that person will make it his/her moral duty not to inflict pain on another human being. Put differently, if traditional woman experiences recognition for the manner in which she displays her dancing skills, it is morally correct for her to show her

appreciation to the admirer. That is a moral action. If a person's understanding comes through sentiments, as most theorists agree, it could therefore be worth considering that moral actions come from our own experience of pain and pleasure, which serve as principle factors that persuade women to act sympathetically to cultural values. Therefore, can a woman's behaviour be judged as unnatural or immoral if she is pursuing happiness by acting out her role in a patriarchal system as part of self-emancipation? Despite the fact that women who accept traditional cultural practices do so without breaking any universal moral rule, certain parts of society would find it hard to accept those who practice traditional life. This is the area where conflicting views affect the way that different societies or communities define morally acceptable behaviour.

It is possible that the answers to these questions are to be found in the context of African ethics and value systems. Could African value systems prohibit natural sentiments for women to attain happiness? Is it true that African women are not allowed to experience happiness through self-emancipation since this will conflict with African value systems? I fully support Stanley and Wise (1983) when they argue against "men's interpretations of women's lives" even if it means African men culturally decide what is good for African women (Stanely & Wise 1983:194). In any event though, African men respect the role women play in exercising their right to cultural practice. Taiwo (2010) confirms this position by saying:

The fact remains that no degree of stereotyping against women existed in traditional Africa. The woman possessed the power to organize the family and the society at large. There was an enormous task and responsibility conferred on womanhood. In fact the responsibility of both men and women were seen as complementary to one another there was a codependence and a balance that existed (Taiwo 2010:230).

It is within this framework, that, I, as an African man, support the view that "feminists should define and interpret their own experiences" (Stanley & Wise

1983:195) in order to sympathise with their experiences. I am fully aware of the fact that the view which promotes women to take control of their own lives is not universally accepted and practised in real life today. At the same time, one ought to understand the conditions in which these views are pronounced. Could these views come from the fact that there are new and additional roles for women that are created as a result of modernisation, which also carries cultural domination, and therefore women find themselves as victims of this cultural supremacy? If one looks at the following argument by Goldman, it is clear that she was fighting for the right of women based on their newly found roles in education and politics, as well as the means of economic production.

On the other hand, the social formation is the core foundation of the emancipation of women in an African context. This social bond is responsible for the promotion of conformity in society, rather than deviance. For example, when a man searches for a woman to marry, he will prefer a woman who will represent the values of his family. Again a woman's family values play a big role especially when that particular family is largely respected and admired by the community. Henry (1947) says it is a difficult choice because the society "demands conformity to its values and modes of living and it punishes by social disgrace those who fail to attain a sufficient degree of that conformity" (Henry 1947:37). It is in this context that, despite access to production and human rights issues, the emancipation of women has sensitive boundaries. These boundaries are difficult to unlock because they are subjective in their nature. Donath (2015) points out that:

to argue that social rules govern emotions, does not mean that the feelings of love expressed are not genuinely experienced, or that they are mere acts of conformity to social expectations. It does mean that to understand fully people's expressions of emotion, we must analyse them in their social context (2015:360)

The social context that compels African women to conform to the patriarchal system is much more complex than that of the Western world. Meekers

(1992) alludes to this, stating that, in contrast to the marriage ceremony which is seen as a discrete event in Western societies, African marriage is a complex institution that generally proceeds by traditional stages, most of which are characterised by the performance of prescribed rites (1992:16).

In the African tradition, marriage is one of the social cohesive tools, whereas in the Western culture it is an agreement between two people. When an African man is about to get married, most members of the community prepare *isipheko*, a gift. On top of that, the families that neighbour the bridegroom's family prepare *umqombothi*, sorghum beer that will be served not only at the bridegroom's home, but at their (the neighbours') homes as well. To top it all, the invitation to the wedding is issued by the *induna*, a servant to the traditional leader. The *induna* announces the wedding dates by blowing the *uphondo*, a horn, after the traditional leader has given him permission to do so. The *induna* also blows a horn to mark the start of the gathering of the community members on the day of the wedding. A traditional name that describes the type of gathering that is announced by *the induna* is *umgido* or *umcimbi*, which, when translated, means a call to a celebration.

Therefore it is unimaginable for African women to object to all these traditional processes if she wants to be respected by the community. To be acknowledged as and have the honour of being the *umfazi wangempela*, or true wife, the woman must collude with and conform to the accepted family or social norms which also form part of the identity of the society. During this process, a newly wed woman is moulded into "patterns of society's values to achieve a satisfying uniqueness within the bounds of social comfort" (Henry 1947:37). What has been described above should not simply be taken as a simple patriarchal practice that constrains African women and prevents them from realising their potential beyond their traditional roles as hard-working, income-generating wives and mothers (Salo 2001:60). I would like to point

out the dignity that is bestowed upon women in general through traditional weddings.

The composition of African social relations such as “Ubuntu” reflect the theories of communicative actions as put forward by the theorist Jurgen Habermas, who termed it “aesthetic expression” to bring sufficient and complete consensus to the subject of conformity (Habermas 1985:20). In Africa, societies operate by consensus such that decision-making in traditional African life and governance is, as a rule, by consensus, whereby an issue is discussed in solemn conclave until such time as an agreement can be achieved (Wiredu 1995:53). For Polanyi (2002), such a process represents communicative action in an “inclusive, non-coercive and reflective” practice, hence it “encourages participants to introduce a variety of observations, beliefs and experiences” (Polanyi 2002:357). In this case, the community, both in the spirit and in actions, works together. The African traditional wedding practices follow the same process, whereby even dancing is done in groups, that is a group from the bride’s tribe competes with one from the groom’s tribe.

The meaning of identity in African society is found through cultural and social unison which provides continuation and celebration of their human heritage. This heritage is celebrated through the promotion of ritual practices, language, dance, singing, poetry and cultural attire. These progressive art forms compel the African to adopt his traditional cultural heritage in which he appreciates his authentic personal selfhood among others in his community (Egbujie 1977:144). In other words, true African self-emancipation is located in the comfort of one’s cultural heritage that includes tangible and intangible attributes where authentic personal selfhood is celebrated among others in a community. This social paradox forms a complex part of human relations. It

imitates the cultural patriarchy that promotes social conformity, and commemorates cultural heritage as part of their identity.

Straffon (2011) argues that mutual relations, organised labour, communication and cooperation would have been impossible to attain if visual and performance arts had not been a natural part of human culture. She contends that art is responsible for the creation of social cohesion and group bonding, citing the artistic ritual ceremonies and early interactions between mothers and their infants, which are “characterized by the repetition and exaggeration of gestural, acoustic, and vocal stimuli to draw and sustain attention between participants” (Straffon 2011). In other words, it is hard to divorce one’s life from conformity without compromising one’s cultural heritage. The meaning of conformity is moulded and intertwined together with the formation of social cohesion because married women who do not conform to cultural norms are at risk of being isolated and rejected by the very society that they are part of. “Since meaning is socially constructed, behaviour has meaning only in relation to its social, cultural, and historical context”; therefore “peer group identity may determine acceptance or rejection”, like in the case of married women who may reject unmarried women as being part of their group (Hartnett 2007:36).

2.3. AFRICAN FEMINISM

The intellectual divide on who has the absolute right to pronounce that African women should subscribe to feminist ideology is still a wide open debate. Defining feminism in the African context is a complex task. Arndt (2002), puts it bluntly in saying that “ultimately, African feminism is nothing but a theoretical model, hence it is impossible to speak of the African feminism” (2002:71). The way Arndt uses this to avoid pinning down the existence of African feminism is that there are two approaches to it. Firstly, she identifies that there is a generic definition of feminism and there is African feminism that

has its own merits. When defining feminism in general, Arndt explains that “feminism is a worldview and way of life of women ... who, as individuals, groups and organisations actively oppose existing gender relationships based on discriminating hierarchies and ratings” (Arndt 2002:71). When it comes to Africa, Arndt concedes that the world view definition should be “modified and contextualised within each given society to which it applies, since the nature of official discrimination within family structures and discrimination gender conception is defined differently for each given African society”(Arndt 2002:72). Even though the context given above states clearly the complexity of defining African feminism, the reality on the ground has its own dynamics. For example, if African women accept their culture with dignity, they are dismissed by feminists as conformists to oppressive customs; if they abandon their culture, they risk rejection by the members of their community (Wehrs 2001:1). Kolawole (1997) confirms this reaction to feminism by looking a number of African writers who have rejected feminism: “Important women writers who spend their life time in dealing with women issues but denied being feminists at various times include Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, Mirriama Ba, and Buchi Emecheta” (Kolawole 1997:10). It is therefore understandable why some African women writers such as Aidoo are cautious in their attempt to define feminism using a sexual approach for fear of reinforcing stereotypes that misrepresent the complexities of African women’s subjectivities and lives, says McWilliams (1999:335). When McWilliams discusses the case of Aidoo’s two novels, she found two shadows of stereotypes obscuring the path of defining feminism in the African context.

Stereotype 1: Westernised-Sexualised African Woman

- *Neglecting her cultural roots and values, this African woman has assimilated European values*
- *She rejects the African concept of women’s roles in society: wife and mother*
- *She substitutes Western values of individual and autonomy to the loss of African values of familial responsibility and collective decision making*

- *She grants her sexual needs more importance than her familial duties and demonstrates a loose sense of morality*
- *Her career is more valuable to her than her maternal and conjugal duties*
- *She undercuts the support she should give her husband by putting her needs first.*

Results: *A vixen cut from a Western cloth of sexual liberation.*

Stereotype 2: *The ideally Africanised African woman*

- *Her pride in a national identity is directly linked to her ability to procreate*
- *Her individual sexual desires and their satisfaction are seen as unimportant in light of the overriding importance of motherhood and its duties/responsibilities*
- *She thrives on the higher value granted to married women who have children*
- *Her devotion to her family drives her to shun single women who are seen as detrimental to society and the nation because they refuse to be wives and mothers.*

Result: *A mother of Africa cut from the cloth of Kente. (McWilliams 1999:336)*

The result that McWilliams mentions in the analogy is intended to highlight complexity in the cultural and social life of an African woman. If she rejects her African cultural identity she risks being punished by her own community for her unkind behaviour.

African female activists who do not want to be called feminists cannot be ridiculed if one looks at the non-negotiable traditional practices found in the African value systems. Arndt (2000) cannot be blamed for failing to understand that some women in Africa are convinced that their situation has to be improved, but that they do not consider themselves feminists (Arndt 2000:710). Why would African women feel no connection to the same movement that fights for them? According to Arndt, the antifeminist reactions stem from radical feminism that rejects marriage, hates men and is non-accepting of African traditions. Secondly, feminism does not see beyond

Western societies and it therefore ignores the specific problems faced by African women, such as neo-colonialism, religious fundamentalism and dictatorial political systems (Arndt 2000:710-711). There is truth in most of these observations. African traditions still play a big role in shaping the types of society that are able to respond to the challenges faced by Africa. Marriage, for example, plays a central role in which society finds its identity. Kolawole quoting Buchi Emecheta in an interview stated that:

I am a feminist with a small "f", I love men and good men are the salt of the earth. But to tell me that we should abolish marriage like the capital "F" (Feminist) women who say women should live together and all that, I say No. Personally I'd like to see the ideal, happy marriage. But if it doesn't work, for goodness sake, call it off.
(Kolawole 1997:10)

It is difficult therefore, for individuals to distance themselves from these traditions as they have internalised them. Furthermore, they influence the behaviour of African women, and as a result an African woman's identity is conceived and its birth is celebrated. Again, the amount of community involvement when preparing for a family member to get married indicates how much trust the community and the family puts on the shoulders of the woman to make sure that she represents the product of the community values in her new home. Therefore, it is difficult for women to break ranks with these traditions as they not only represent the individual's values, but those of the family and the community as a whole. What makes matters even more complex is the issue of *amadlozi*, or ancestors. Newell (1976) confirms that:

Ancestors remain one of the most powerful spiritual forces in Africa where belief in ancestors, particularly their activity in the social structures is widespread. African ancestors play an interventionist role in the affairs of the lineage and exercise a countervailing force in balancing the delicate relations between the world of man and the world of the spirits in which they are active participants (1976:283)

Most African wedding procedures include the introduction of the newlywed woman to the ancestors of the groom's family. Therefore, wedding customs

are fundamentally linked to respecting and complying with the wishes of the ancestors. If, for example, the wedding procedure is done incorrectly, any problems that may occur in a couple's marriage may be linked back to improper conduct during the wedding ceremony or preliminary rites. As a result, the complexity of African traditions justify why African women conform to these customary conducts.

2.4 AFRICAN WOMANISM

African womanism is the only definition that seems to unite most African writers in describing the lives and experience of African women. Alice Walker is credited with introducing the term "womanist" into feminist phrasing in her 1983 book *In search of our mothers' gardens: Womanist prose*. For the purpose of this research I will use Kolawole's book *Womanism and the African consciousness* to define the concept of womanism. As discussed earlier, the concept of feminism does not enjoy the full support of African writers. Kolawole (1997) confirms this, saying "many African women resist subscribing to feminism as a rejection of the imperialistic attempt to force them to accept a foreign 'ism' that is superfluous to the needs of the majority" (1997:20). According to Kolawole (1997:24), many African women are in favour of the concept of Womanism as a valid African ideology. When defining the concept of womanism, Kolawole says, "for Africans, womanism is the totality of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval, and self-assertion in positive cultural ways (Kolawole 1997:24). For Allan (1995), African womanism defines the promotion of women's projects on grounds totally unaffiliated with Euro-American feminism and unannexed to black and African feminism (1995:9). Hudson-Weems also confirms the concept of womanism, saying:

African womanism emerged from the acknowledgement of the long standing authentic agenda from that group of women of African descent who needed only to properly named officially defined according to their own uniquely historical and cultural matrix,

one that would reflect the co-existence of man and woman in concerted struggle for the survival of their own entire family and community (Hudson-Weems 2008:29)

Hudson-Weems understands that African women have fought against racial discrimination brought about by colonialism as well as apartheid, and their struggle was not aimed at eliminating either men or themselves from family responsibilities, but rather at acknowledging them as allies as they, too, were victims of colonialism. Therefore, it is understandable why African women are suspicious of accepting feminism at face value. "African women have historically demonstrated that they are diametrically opposed to the concept of many white feminists who want independence and freedom from family responsibilities", contends Hudson-Weems (2008:19). Hudson-Weems cautions the practice of dominating the African agenda with white feminist ideology by Western writers. For Kolawole, the African woman's conceptualisation of freedom is not based on the erosion of her feminine qualities, but is a manifestation of female fashion designs and other physical adornments that are unique to women (1997:29).

Kolawole (1997) confirms that communal and personal factors play a significant role in mediating the location of African women in gender discourse. She cites African historical events brought by colonialism as the cause for different kinds of affiliations. African perceptions and consciousness have been influenced by a number of factors, such as religion, tradition, modernism and ethnicity, writes Kolawole (1997:4). This view points to the fact that a religious woman may be identified differently from a traditional woman who is usually nicknamed *iqaba* meaning uneducated. The belief systems of both women run in opposite directions. Their social groupings are also different. Therefore, they conform to different life experiences. Although they may be the victims of the same colonialist system, the location of their identity is different as they follow different traditional rituals. Does respect for

each other woman's position make African women disadvantaged? No, it does not; in fact, the cultural diversity presents a unique advantage to African women. Kolawole argues that diversity is central to "dualities, paradoxes and simultaneous existence of values in African philosophy" (Kolawole 1997:5). In other words, different cultural views do not deny African women the opportunity to live side-by-side in harmony. African day-to-day life does not pay attention to gender roles. Kolawole makes an example of how her grandmother would approach the headmaster of a school to seek recourse if she is not happy with the manner in which a child was disciplined. According to Kolawole, her grandmother was "not a feminist but a strong African woman" (Kolawole 1997:10). "African women do not need feminism, African women were feminist long before feminism" declares Aidoo (1998:46). In an African context, the actions of Kolawole's grandmother are viewed as part of family-oriented responsibility. It is not interpreted as a radical feminist attack on a male headmaster.

Africans have managed to sustain self-consciousness by focusing on aspects of positive heritage that come from family-oriented experience, writes Kolawole (1997:13). Although African women experience cultural oppression, their situation is complex and different from that of the Western view. The African realities require women "to unite with men in a concerted effort to reject racist and imperialist subjugation" (Kolawole 1997:13). An "African woman does not see the man as her primary enemy as does the white feminist", confirms Hudson-Weems (1998:155). Therefore, African women unlike Western women cannot isolate themselves from men even though they experience problems with the patriarchal system. Aidoo dismisses the culture of "put her down" as African, but asserts that it "is a warmed-up leftover from colonisation" (Aidoo 1998:47). Aidoo's assertion confirms earlier views expressed by Kolawole who cites the African historical events brought about by colonialism as the cause of different kinds of affiliations. Hudson-Weems

(1998) confirms this position when she quotes Aidoo (1986) saying feminism is a Western philosophy designed to destroy African homes and ruin African women (Hudson-Weems 1998:149).

The views expressed above confirm that African womanism refuses to allow the Western philosophy of feminism to dominate African homes. For Africans, feminism with its radical approach reminds them of the Western colonisation of their continent. Therefore, Africans cannot afford to have another intellectual domination and interpretation of their own lives by outsiders. Chukukere (1998:138) confirms this view when she asserts that “womanism is not antagonistic to Nigerian men, but recognizes communality of struggle with them to overthrow imperialism”. Then the question is how did African men turn against the African women who fought side-by-side with them to overthrow colonialism? Sofola (1988) puts the blame squarely on the acquisition of knowledge from Western philosophy, where the “learning process are foreign in form and content” (Sofola 1988:51). She further argues that educated Africans, both male and female, are not properly equipped to discuss the African experience because of the intellectual vacuum that came from years of brainwashing. Sofola points to the Western formulation of the words “male and *fe*-male”, “man and *wo*-man”, and how these words present a female as an “appendage” of male, with both words “deriv[ing] from masculine” (Sofola 1988:53). According to Sofola, the Western construction of language is contrary to African traditional cultures. She notes that Igbo and Yoruba use a common denominator to construct words that represent male and female. For example, Sofola argues that the Igbo world for a child is *nwa*, with a boy being referred to as “*nwa-oke*” and “*nwa-nyi*” referring to a girl, and both genders together are called *madu*, which means “human” (Sofola 1988:53).

The argument by Sofola is similar for Nguni languages. In Zulu, *umuntu* refers

to humans of both genders. The word *indodana* refers to a boy and *indodakazi* to a girl. Furthermore, the word *inkosi* refers to male and *inkosikazi* is a female. The word *umufazi* refers to *umuntu wesifazane*, or woman, and the word *umfazi* in the cultural context means *umuntu ofa azi*, which means to die knowing. In the African languages the meanings of words are also derived from their functional responsibilities, for example, *umfazi* or a mother learns through experience of being a mother on how to feed her family.

The language or word construction in the African languages dismisses the notion that a woman is an accessory to a natural man. The words point to the fact that most African languages take the role of women in the construction of social norms seriously. One would agree with Aidoo when she dismisses the culture of “put her down” as African, but asserts that it “is a warmed-up leftover from colonisation” of African intellectual cultures (Aidoo 1998:47). Therefore, the definition of feminism as oppression by men is the “Western predated upsurge of radical feminism” (Aina 1998:67). It was earlier called the “Woman’s Suffrage Movement [which] started when a group of liberal, white women, whose concerns then were for the abolition of slavery and equal rights for all people” (Hudson-Weems 1998:151).

The contestation in the definition of African feminism or womanism and Western feminism lies in the founding statements. African woman writers such as Hudson-Weems argues that the term “feminism was conceptualized and adopted by white women to meet the needs and demands of that particular group”, whereas, “African women did not focus exclusively on women issues” (Hudson-Weems 1998:153). For Sofola (1998), the challenge is much deeper as she refers to the “de-womanisation of the African womanhood assailed by Western and Arab cultures” (Sofola 1998:52). Whatever was “central and relevant in the traditional African socio-political

domain” was invaded by “male-centered and male-dominate European and Arab cultures”; as a result, the African “female suffers the greater damage” argues Sofola (1998:53). For African people, Western philosophy is not trusted since it was responsible for causing oppression during the era of colonialism. The argument on the above points is the fact that Africans want to take control of their intellectual space, defining their experience based on pure understanding of their cultural situation. If they accept feminist ideology in its present form, it will be a sign of their betrayal of their ancestors who fought against white domination. For them, feminism should acknowledge its shortcomings when it comes to African cultural complexities. Feminism should not disturb Africa’s rich family orientation in pursuit of gender equality.

2.5 AFRICAN GENDER RELATIONS

The second aspect of the debate in African feminism is the issue of gender relations. In Africa, “controversy amongst feminists stems from the efforts to confront gender relations, practices and identities” (Lewis 2001:4). For example, the issue of lesbians is a hot topic amongst the rural communities. It is difficult for a father to lose *ilobola* from a daughter that has decided to become a lesbian. Lobola is a tradition in many southern African countries, which is expected to be adhered to by anyone who is part of the community as it is part of paying respect to both the elders and the community (Heeren et al. 2011:73). Traditional communities rely on the *ilobola* in the form of cows to raise the stock for their family. According to tradition, it was customary to pay the lobola with cattle (Heeren et al. 2011:74). Secondly, *ilobola* is a source of income for some families, as the cows are a stable source of food and milk. Therefore the issue of gender relations cannot be easily separated from traditional marriages without rejecting the social and cultural norms of the family as well as the community.

The next cultural practices that are linked to the issue of gender are dress

code, food and dining. Sitting during dinning is another source of identity amongst African women. Nguni women associate their attire and their new home as a wedded woman with honour and dignity. This is because the status of marriage is considered prestigious in African cultures, as Kolawole alluded to earlier. As a result, a divorced woman does not have a reputable status in African culture. For example, divorced women do not have *isithebe* (food and dining settings) during traditional ceremonies. Food and dining settings are one of the most respected forms of our culture. For example, guests are seated according to their standing in the community. When it comes to dining, married women are seated and given a particular part of the meat, such as *umlenze* and *isifuba* (hind leg and chest). Married men, on the other hand, are given *inhloko* (head). Young boys eat *iphaphu* (lungs). Young men eat *umlenze* (front leg). That is why divorced women are only allowed to eat with *abashana* (children born out of wedlock) or take refuge among older women. Other objects, such as a wedding kist and the rituals associated with it, influence newly wedded Nguni women to conform to the principles of *isihlonipho* (a form of respect). *Isihlonipho* does not simply represent a sign of respect, but is the “expression of Zuluness” or Xhosaness (Rudwick & Shange 2006:473). In his thesis “*Ukuhlonipha kwamaXhosa*”, Sakhiwo Bongela describes the concept as a customary practice designed to instil discipline and respect amongst the members of the society (Bongela 2001:10). In this research, *isihlonipho* refers to the “language of respect used by women of the Nguni cluster” (Luthuli 2007:1). According to Luthuli (2007), it is a traditional language of respect that refers specifically to the names of the father-in-law and other family members of the husband (2007:2). “Husband, wife and the in-laws avoid using their respective names and substitute for them several forms, most of which are coining’s” (Mbaya 2002:224). For example, in Nguni culture a married woman is not supposed to use the word *amanzi* (meaning water) if her father-in-law is named *Manz’ odaka* (meaning mud waters). So the woman will substitute the word *amanzi*

with a *coining* and refer to water as *amacubane* in order to show respect to her in-laws. These customary practices are mostly practised by women; hence I am referring to them in order to put the use of *isihlonipho* in context.

2.6 AFRICAN CULTURAL RITES

Kolawole (2004:251) acknowledges that the features of African societies, for certain specific and complex reasons, make it problematic in reality to conceptualise sexuality and gender discourse. She further argues that new concepts that are acceptable to African specificities should be allowed to unfold, but not based on the premise of interrogating gender concepts without confirming areas of commonalities and differences. This exercise needs to recognise the interplay of class, culture, ethnicity, religion and politics so that the process of re-articulating genders matches up with action and activism for positive self-restoration (Kolawole 2004:253). One of the sensitive specificities around sexuality and gender is a traditional practice known as *ukuhlolwa kwezintombi* (virginity testing), which has caused conflict between the institutions of government and the community. As an example of this type of conflict, Scorgie (2002) cites the march that took place in Pietermaritzburg in 2000 against a state-owned entity:

In early August 2000 a small but vociferous crowd of teenage girls marched through the streets of central Pietermaritzburg, singing, chanting slogans and holding hand-written placards that stated "We are not being forced!" and "Down with the Gender Commission!" The girls were followed by a handful of middle-aged women, dressed in elaborately beaded outfits and conical hats typically worn by "traditionalist" Zulu women. These were the abahloli — women who conduct virginity inspections on young girls — and together, they were marching to protest against the Commission on Gender Equality (CGE) and the Human Rights Commission (HRC), who have condemned their activities (2002:55).

To some, virginity testing is a violation of human dignity that should be banned, whereas those who still practise this tradition see nothing wrong with

it and would defend any attempts to ban the process. For example, virginity testing is carried out by elderly women, and its main objective is to preserve virginity in young women who are expected to be virgins when they marry. A secondary reason that virginity testing is done is to promote good behaviour, especially in an environment where HIV and Aids are prevalent.

Communities have been divided on the question of whether — as originally claimed — it will offer a viable route to the “regeneration” of Zulu cultural pride in a post-apartheid South Africa. Critics of the practice have raised further questions about the volition of the girls participating in these ceremonies. Many have argued that the testing amounts to a violation of the right to privacy and control over one’s body. And ... virginity testing is invariably paraded as a “local” solution to the AIDS crisis, and indeed draws its justification from the tragic surge in infection rates among young people in recent years (Scorgie 2002:56).

Therefore, it is difficult to scorn this practice as it is done to retain family dignity in order to lead to a dignified marriage. The family of a virginal woman would be proud to present the bridegroom with a woman they know has not been involved in any illicit conduct that could attract community stigma. Secondly, the price for *ilobolo* can even be higher for women who are virgins when they marry, because there is nothing the woman has done that can cause embarrassment.

The transfer of bridewealth had meaning as a public demonstration of new commitments formed by the lineages contracting in marriage and the inherent duties and obligations that this entailed. In these societies, virgin brides have long been highly regarded. In African societies of a few generations ago the boy’s family would be expected to pay an additional head of bridewealth (cattle) if the girl was ‘proven’ to be a virgin. This cow was given to the bride’s mother as a token of thanks for having guarded the new daughter-in - law’s virginity until marriage (Leclerc-Madlala 2003:18).

This traditional practice thus helps to build strong bonds between the extended families, especially in-laws, as stated earlier by Luthuli when elaborating on the use of *isihlonipho* (the language of respect).

2.7 THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN SOCIETY

The African experience of life is characterised by relatedness, and Sofola (1998:54) notes that a person is considered *umuntu* because of his/her connectedness within his/her community. To support her statement, Sofola points to the role of the dual-sex governing system that is politically organised among the Igbo, west of the Niger, and the Onotsha, east of the Niger (1998:54). Sofola states that relatedness makes it possible for a society to evolve a socio-political order that gives members of the society equal opportunity to govern (1998:54).

The role of women in the socio-political affairs in northern Africa bares some similarities to historical events in the Zulu nation. Mkabayi ka-Jama, aunt to Shaka kaSenzangakhona, the father of the famous Zulu King, Shaka Zulu, played an important role in Zulu history. During her reign in the nineteenth century, Mkabayi kaJama successfully fulfilled her role as head of the tribe (Kunene 1995:40). Golan (1990) also attests to this by saying:

Shaka's aunt, Mkabayi, provides a good example, and we are told that whilst Senzangakhona was still a minor, the Zulu nation was ruled by [Mkabayi]. Even after Senzangakhona had attained manhood and she had handed over to him to rule for himself, she nevertheless continued to be his elder sister and to advise him on matters concerning the Zulu nation (1990:103).

The roles played by women in the history of African culture give some indication of why African women's activists are reluctant to take a radical feminist approach when addressing issues of sexuality and gender in their society. They do not want to misrepresent the reputable history of the leadership roles played by Nguni women such as Mkabayi kaJama, Nandi (Shaka's mother), Esther Mahlangu (internationally-renowned painter) and Albertina Sisulu (well-known political activist). For many people, these women represent pride, a source of identity and a sense of belonging. Well-known theorists such as Hume and Locke have commented on the importance of the

senses. Hume (1952:451) observes that people's actions are chiefly influenced by their senses and sentiments, and Locke (1952:96) asserts that "senses and perceptions are responsible for imprinting the natural tendencies for understanding objects and actions on the human mind". These sensual connections to the objects of history (women's leadership) are responsible for the manifestation of principled human behaviour that sees radical feminist views as foreign to the African culture (Kolawole 1997).

An examination of the history of liberation in Africa dismisses the concept of a "culture of silence" amongst women in African society (Kolawole 2004:255). For example, the ANC was founded in 1912, and the following year the ANC Women's League was established under the leadership of Charlotte Maxeke (1874-1939) (Arnold 2005:5). Since then, a number of women who have been credited for outstanding leadership have emerged, including Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Albertina Sisulu, Graca Machel and many others. Most of these distinguished women fought against apartheid and human rights abuses on behalf of both men and women. They never saw their struggle as being directed towards fighting for women's rights only. Therefore the conception that African women do not take a stand against patriarchy and cultural oppression misses the context within which African women approach these challenges. In 1952, for example, women, both black and white, joined the ANC-organised Defiance Campaign of civil disobedience against unjust laws, (Arnold 2005:5).

2.8 AFRICAN ETHICS

There is no "better" foundation for African ethics that could replace relatedness (referred to in Zulu as *ubuhlobo*). Bujo (2001) describes relatedness as a central theme in defining African ethics. Africans strongly embrace relatedness. Relatedness is impossible to categorise it as biological since its significant goes beyond visible community to include invisible

community, namely, ancestors (Bujo 2001:19-21). It is thus impossible to talk about African ethics without reference to the concept of *Ubuntu* (literally: “humanness”), which is expressed in many South African languages, and which Munyaka and Motlhabi (2009) define as a way of life that is expressed in, for example, the Xhosa phrase “*umuntu ngumntu ngabanye abantu*”, which translates as “a person is a person through other persons” (Munyaka & Motlhabi 2009:65).

Murove (2009:28) puts it bluntly that “African ethics arises from an understanding of the world as an interconnected whole whereby what it means to be ethical is inseparable from all spheres of existence”. In Africa, interconnectedness or relatedness is even part of the idioms we use in our daily lives, such as the Zulu proverb “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*”, which refers to the same idea – that a person is recognised as a person through their participation in the community (a person is a person through other persons). This idea, which is so important in African culture, goes against the theory of self-emancipation through individual self-realisation that is attributed to the Western lifestyle. Bujo (2001) says that it should not be membership of a community that constitutes a person’s identity, but rather that common actions should make a person “human” (Bujo 2001:87). Ethical behaviour in the African context requires people to cooperate with others, thereby promoting the balance required for people to live in solidarity and harmony with fellow members of their families and communities (Mkhize 2008:40).

Mkhize (2008:41) further argues that this mode of behaviour requires that each person maintains social justice, is empathetic to others, and is respectful of him/herself and towards others; and that when these values of *Ubuntu* are in place, social equilibrium is maintained. It is also worth noting that these African ethical practices do not divide humans according to gender; rather, the emphasis is on understanding one’s duty to one’s community, irrespective

of gender. Murove (2009) attributes this ethical practice to the sense of being connected – of being bounded by the common, unified human relationships – that defines African behavioural patterns. The African concept of community arises from the bonded network of life that embraces fellowship in the community to commemorate members of the community who existed in the past, as well as to prepare the community to nurture future generations (Murove 2009:29).

These ethical actions are noticeable when Africans from the same community meet one another in a foreign country and greet each other as brothers and sisters. The extension of African brother/sisterhood and solidarity does not only stay within the cultural and social settings; it is extended to other social settings, as can be seen in workers' slogan of Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions), which says that "*an injury to one is an injury to all*". The practice of solidarity is also evident in other African countries. In Burundi, for example, if one member of the community has eaten the meat of a disgraced animal, such as a dog, the whole community will be disgraced (Bujo 2001:87). This brings us back to the issue of women who defy social values in the interest of self-emancipation. It is quite clear that in Africa, for self-emancipation to be recognised and to be honoured as *ubuntu*, it should serve the interests of the community at large rather than those of individuals. African languages idioms are not short of description in their language to refer to strange behaviours. For example, the Zulu idiom "*inkomo edla yodwa*", which translates as a person who lives a lonely life, describes a person who does not mix with other members of the community. This confirms that African traditions do not promote an individualist lifestyle that does not serve the vision of the community. Shutte (2009) confirms the assertion that *Ubuntu* is part and parcel African livelihood, and explains that the origins of the concept of *Ubuntu* can be found in community songs and storytelling, and *Ubuntu* itself is embodied in traditional African customs and institutions; it forms part

of the ethos and lifestyle of the whole community or village (Shutte 2009:85). Nussbaum also stresses the issue of interconnectedness when she defines *Ubuntu*, saying “Ubuntu addresses our interconnectedness, our common humanity and responsibility to one another that flows from that connection” (Nussbaum 2009:101).

There is no doubt that movements which support the emancipation of women have brought much-needed relief to women around the world. The relief from discrimination in the workplace, the equal access to justice, the fight against domestic abuse and many other causes, has benefited women in general. This also took place in South Africa during the apartheid period, where women also fought against discrimination towards women. The difference is that in South Africa, these women were also fighting against apartheid, while in the US African-Americans were fighting against racism. Liberation stalwart Albertina Sisulu is one of many women who fought for human rights and justice. Her contribution to the liberation of South African politics has not been referred to as “feminist” or “gender-based” activism, because her actions were adopted and owned by both men and women. That is why she was named the “Mother of the Nation”, and is often referred to as Mama Sisulu. This, then, is the basis of African ethics and morals – where the actions of an individual are not celebrated only as a sign of selfhood, but also serve to reflect the aspirations of that individual’s immediate community, as well as the whole society. Mama Sisulu’s suffering was not only endured by her immediate family, but by the whole country sympathised with her. What matters in the end are the actions of one individual who cared deeply about helping not only her family but others as well, reflected the notion of *Ubuntu* (Mkhize 2008:35; Richardson 2008:65; Nicolson 2008:1; Nussbaum 2003:21; Ramose 2009:398; Murove 2009:315). *Ubuntu* is the natural expression of a human being that reflects the presence of goodwill towards others and is not tempered by any reason, whether happiness, fear or honour. Therefore, if the

actions of African women within their communities are a call for goodwill, should we accuse those women of conformity? If the actions of a woman make her feel good or fulfil her natural desire for goodwill, should that woman not be credited for acting on her wishes without imposing restrictions on what she can or cannot do? By this, I do not mean that the feminist movement should not deal with private matters; my point is that the emancipation argument is incorrectly located in the individual only, and not in the community.

In this research, I argue that the emancipation of women should not be dependent on gender, but that it should be the responsibility of all humans, irrespective of gender, culture or religion, to act out of “goodwill which is a natural moral duty” to treat all human beings with respect and dignity (Kant 2001:151-166). Goldman’s argument for freedom in the “truest sense” covers the recognition of the emancipation of women in its totality and reserves no barriers for manipulation by men at any point. This position positions Habermas’s theory of communicative action as the truest form of Ubuntu, one that reflects authentic expression that is adopted and accepted by the community because it comes from natural goodwill that is not tainted by any form of prejudice or injustice. The work of Mama Sisulu reflects the true values of *Ubuntu* and, when compared to communicative theory, it corresponds with what Habermas refers to as expressions that reflect the nature of the actor’s desires and feelings, in line with those culturally or socially established standards and values (Habermas 1985:20). Mama Sisulu’s work was socially accepted because it was validated through “aesthetic experience” (Habermas 1985:21), displayed through “solidarity” (Bujo 2001:87) with other women who were in the same situation. The responsibility of African ethics calls for an individual to actively participation in the life of the community (Bujo 2001:85-87). These actions complete the definition of African ethics that is culturally and socially acceptable, and that is

expected from each and every African, irrespective of sex or gender. Finally, Ubuntu also defines the differences between the Western focus on selfhood from an individual's point of view and the African focus on community, as expressed by the phrase "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*".

2.9 PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

Based on the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), this study explores, by means of visual reflection, how Nguni women make sense of their personal, cultural and social world in order to understand the meaning of the conformity experiences in their daily lives. The researcher's perspective as a man comes from the premise that "in truth humanity is divided into two classes of individuals whose clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, gaits, interests, and occupations are manifestly different" (de Beauvoir 2005:28). This is not to say that my views or my individuality serve as a direct and normal connection with the world, which I believe I apprehend objectively, whereas I regard the body of woman as a hindrance weighed down by everything peculiar to it (de Beauvoir 2005:28).

Again, I will not rest my views on the preconception view of the "other" as explained by de Beauvoir (2005:29). In fact, de Beauvoir dismisses the "other" as a fundamental category of the most primitive human thought with no dependency upon any empirical facts (2005:29). Although de Beauvoir went into detail in justifying the existence of otherness, for the purpose of this research I settle for the less defined concept of reciprocity of relations between men and women (de Beauvoir 2005:29). It is therefore upon this premise that this research utilises IPA as a qualitative research approach aimed at describing how people make sense of their life experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin 2009:1).

The approach is phenomenological in the sense that it involves detailed examination of the Nguni women's life world; it attempts to explore personal experience of conformity and is concerned with an individual's personal perception of cultural and social events, as opposed to being an attempt to produce an objective statement of these events itself (Smith 2007:54). The main objective of this approach is to describe personal life experiences that manifest themselves in the social and cultural identity of Nguni women.

The study narrates Nguni women's behaviour in relation to their knowledge and adoption of culture. To be more specific, the study focuses on married women in order to describe mutual benefits in relation to their husbands. The phenomenological methodology (Husserl 1970:103, Heidegger 1988:20, Gadamer 1976:105; and Merleau-Ponty 1962:61) is used in this research and grounded in a feminist perspective with the aim, firstly, of describing situations experienced by women in daily life (Sadala & Adorno 2002:283). Secondly, this methodology is used to describe "intentional experiences of consciousness" in visual representations of women shaped by female and male artists in order to understand "how the meaning a phenomenon is given meaning and how its essence is attained" (Sadala and Adorno 2002:283).

The phenomenological methodology allows the researcher to uncover Nguni women's life experiences in order to understand the values that characterise their moral obligation as women, mothers and wives. The research investigates the social ideologies, visual objects and culture which modern women artists such as Nandipha Mntambo and Mary Sibande have used in their artwork as a source to shape the new identity of a modern woman.

As applied to this research, phenomenology is the study of phenomena: their nature and meanings, and the focus is on the way things appear to us through experience or in our consciousness, where the phenomenological

researcher aims to provide a rich textured description of lived experience (Finlay 2008:1). Merleau-Ponty calls it a study of essences that aims to find the definition of essence: essence of perception, and it is also a philosophy which puts essence back into existence in the world that is always already there before reflection begins as an inalienable presence (1962: vii).

According to Sadala and Adorno (2002), phenomenology proposes that a phenomenon be described instead of being explained or having its casual relations searched for, and it focuses on the very things as they manifest themselves (2002:283). In other words, its focus is to “get closer in order to make sense of that other personal world through a process of interpretative activity” (Smith 2007:53). The “life world”, according to Husserl (2006:xxv), is a key concept and focus of investigation for phenomenology. The life world comprises the world of objects around us as we perceive them, and our experience of our self, body and relationships (Finlay 2008:1).

The phenomenological approach is in sync with what the feminists writers such as Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1983) describe in their definition of the lived experience. These feminists acknowledge the importance of the personal and of experience when conducting feminist academic research (Stanley & Wise 1983:151). Stanley and Wise (1983:165) believe that:

[A] feminist social science research should begin with the recognition that the personal, direct experience underlines all behaviours and actions. We need to find out what it is that we know and what it is that we experience. We need to reclaim, name and rename our experiences and our knowledge of the social world live in and daily construct.

As indicated earlier, the phenomenological approach used in this research is grounded in the feminist perspective in the sense that it promotes the qualitative research approach of the “social science that starts with women’s

experience of women's reality" (Stanley and Wise 1983:165). Sadala & Adorno confirms this by saying that in phenomenology:

[T]he researcher focuses on searching for its essence, the most invariable parts of that experience as it is located within a context. The essence, therefore, is the very nature of what is being questioned. The core of phenomenology is the intentionality of consciousness, understood as the direction of consciousness towards understanding the world (Sadala & Adorno 2002:283).

Finlay (2008:1) sums it up by saying:

This lived world is pre-reflective it takes place before we think about it or put it into language. The idea of life world is that we exist in a day-to-day world that is filled with complex meanings which form the backdrop of our everyday actions and interactions. The term life-world directs attention to the individual's lived situation and social world rather than some inner world of introspection.

Phenomenology, as Sadala and Adorno (2002) state, is the rigorous science of the search for essences, but it is also a philosophy that sees people in a world that already exists, before any reflection (2002:286). Applied to art, "the phenomenological approach addresses the artwork as a stylistic phenomenon, that is, one that is created and experienced visually" (Crowther 2012:3).

2.10 METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study is informed by two research techniques, namely observation and performance that are part of the ethnography family of research techniques. "Ethnography is the act of observing directly the behaviour of a social group and producing descriptive thereof" (Freeman & Spanjaard 2012:239). The "strategies and tactics of interaction are largely based on an understanding of friendly feelings and intimacy, to optimize cooperative, mutual disclosure and a creative search for mutual understanding" (Douglas 2010:164). The presentation art installations and performance are described "as a means of enabling the individual to express himself most effectively and finally as a

developer of aesthetic taste and appreciation of experiences of our everyday life" (Weber 1923:37). The main focus of this work is addressing "broader societal and cultural implications, rather than using only what style discloses in relations to more concrete human experience" (Crowther 2012:3).

This study acknowledges that the artworks presented are the result of navigating through "mutual disclosure" sensitive process such as the rite of passage during initiation and the introduction of a woman to her new family (Douglas 2010:164). Observation is in line with Smith's model of phenomenology where it observes personal experience of conformity and is concerned with an individual's personal perception of cultural and social events (Smith 2007:54). For Freeman & Spanjaard (2012:239), "observation is a method that has the potential to capture data occurring within natural environments from the multiple viewpoints of the actors involved, using conversations and interpretations in order to gain a deep understanding of the social phenomenon that is being examined". According to McCurdy & Uldam (2014:41), participant observation can help generate insights into issues from the perspective of the actors and it is inevitably influenced by our relationships with the research subjects and our interpretations of what we observe.

The study uses art installations to expose the basic element of "style as a bearer of aesthetic meaning" (Crowther 2012:1) in order to produce a descriptive interpretation of this social phenomenon. For Delius (1953:305), the descriptive phenomenological method is an instrument of interpretative research and it is given the function not only of describing but also of interpreting given phenomena. According to Riffaterre (1981:107), the grammaticality of descriptive discourse is thus defined by its acceptability within the context of the socialist, since the socialist reflects a customary consensus on what reality is.

Performance in this research involves the process of learning to “see the world through someone else’s eyes, using ourselves as a research instrument; it thus follows that we must experience our research both intellectually and emotionally” (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2009:62). The success of the interpretation lies in observing the performance and interviewing elites, which hinges on the researcher’s knowledgeability regarding the interviewee’s life history and background (Mikecz 2012:482). The elites in this case refer to my wife and my grandmother as actors that this study uses to interpret their life experiences. The process of observing and “hear[ing] the voice of participants is crucial” to the development of the artworks of this study (Mikecz 2012:483). The Nguni wedding used as a theme in this study is a cultural and social phenomenon that my wife is experiencing as she continues to perform the duties of a married woman as she understands them. The artwork in this study goes beyond performance and representation:

The Theatre of Cruelty is not a representation. It is life itself, in the extent to which life is unrepresentable. Life is the non-representable origin of representation” (Derrida, in Krueger 2010:233).

The artworks and performance in this study are more than shapes and art forms. They are presented as a way of “visually disclosing attitudes towards aspects of the world including social factors which engages with some of the deepest aspects of human experience” (Crowther 2012:1-2). “Humans actively co-construct the meanings of their lives as they are intertwined in relationships of emotional interdependence” (Douglas 2010:164). As “our thoughts are constructed from our experience of a lifetime of representation” (Reed 2012:272), so is the premise of these artworks. In chapter four the meaning of the art installation in relation to the topic will be presented in detail.

CHAPTER THREE: ARTISTIC INFLUENCE

According to Soyinka-Airewele (2010:1),

The “demand of post-independence Africa: of its writers, artists, politicians, philosophers, theologians, economists, scientists and humanists, that our modes of analysis and application, our sense of affirmation and wellbeing, whether in intellectual pursuits and products, or in socio-cultural and economic organization, should fall in line with the demand for imitative, subaltern conventionality, orthodoxy and modes of compliance; demands that are dictated by hierarchical canons that first erase Africans as autonomous agents before benevolently integrating us as objects”.

In other words, it can be said with certainty that modern societal demands applied to African women are not of purely African origin, and therefore should not be attributed to African culture. Western domination of African intellectual models and philosophical thought has been the main driver behind Africans being urged to conform and submit to an alien culture that manifested doubt about the originality of African culture. South Africans, for example, experienced their first taste of freedom in 1994 after decades of domination by Westerners and white Africans. For this reason, South African intellectuals, including African artists, have a long road ahead of them when it comes to “reconstructing affirming modes of social justice, community, identity and place after the protracted age of viciously malignant captivity in the subjugating frames of western academia” (Soyinka-Airewele 2010:1).

In reconstructing the identity of Nguni women in the post-apartheid era, I examine in this chapter how South African female artists such as Nandipha Mntambo and Mary Sibande address the issues of conformity and identity. I highlight the inspirations and similarities that these female artists brought to my own art concepts. These artists use cloth, female forms, performances and fabrics in their artworks as metaphors for challenging or confirming

various complex social or cultural conformities as part of the expression of contemporary African identity. Nandipha Mntambo uses performance, cow hide sculpture and photography to express her experience of the world as an African woman. These two artists were chosen because their artwork and performance address the social phenomena I am addressing through my artworks. Again their approach to art use human experience performance to draw the attention of the viewer to the subject of identity.

The works of these two female artists comes across as a “stylistic phenomenon, that is, as created and experienced visually, rather than reduced to ... aesthetic belief” (Crowther 2012:3). According to Crowther (2012:2), style in this sense is not just the way the picture looks it actually embodies a way of acting upon the world through painting or sculpture that changes the character of the subject matter being addressed. In line with the phenomenological approach, this chapter investigates the way these female artists use style to bring about fundamental changes between the subject and object of experience at the level of visible things (Crowther 2012:2), and thus describes distinctive ways in which the artist’s style presents itself to the senses (Crowther 2012:2). In discussing these two artists, my emphasis limited to two stylistic tendencies, borrowed from Crowther’s four prominent stylistic tendencies.

As part of the phenomenological approach to art critique, the initial tendency to be partially abandoned when describing the artistic styles of the two artists is the “traditional academic ideal of form, skills and composition criteria” (Crowther 2012:4). Instead, an “emotional and authentic communication with the viewer approach” is used to discuss the selected artworks (Crowther 2012:5). A second, more provocative and somewhat emotionally disturbing (due to the use of controversial materials) approach is used instead of traditional artistic criteria that promote moral propriety (Crowther 2012:4-5).

The choice of materials in Mntambo's work reflects this second approach. Mntambo uses cow hides collected from the abattoirs that are full of dirt and the smell of rot. She drapes her body with the soft skin to the amazement of some of the viewers, who are "repulsed by the smell" of the material (Buys 2010:107).

In support of Crowther's criteria, the philosophical approach adopted for this investigation aims to reflect the artists' authentic life world experience. Again, most of Sibande's artworks address and reflect on the experience of domesticity in her performance. The intention behind including these artists in this discussion is to reveal the "representational meaning" of their artwork, rather than the "separation of art and life; the emphasis on form versus content" (Stangos 1994:8). For example, Sibande's performance reveals the deep human experience and meaning around the life of a domestic worker. She addresses the aspirations, dreams and fantasies in the life of a domestic worker. For Ran (2009), the phenomenological approach is concerned with "how an art piece communicates and how it affects human perceptions, feelings, concerns, understanding and values" (Ran 2009:3).

The artists that have been selected and discussed in this research use "art as an instrument of emotional communication, as a language of emotions and new perceptions" while addressing the "changing cultural conception of space and time" (Ran 2009:3). It is not my intention to discover new facts in the works of the selected artists; rather, I want to provide the "concepts which hide behind them" (Stangos 1994:7) in order to describe their "aesthetic meaning" (Crowther 2012:1). This is done by describing art installations, "examin[ing] the questions [they attempt] to ask, and offer[ing] the interpretation of the meanings [they try] to create and communicate" (Ran 2009:1).

3.1. CLOTH AS A METAPHOR

Continuing with the phenomenological approach of describing the meaning rather than form of art, the following section discusses the significance of the cloth in relation to its meaning within African culture. Omatseye and Emeriewen (2012:57) observe that in African society, the art and life of the people symbiotically reflect each other – cloth has metaphorical import that helps to define the concepts of people and their culture, their social relationships, their beliefs and their understanding of human existence. In other words, the construct of aesthetics in the form of motifs and symbols on the cloth has a deep spiritual meaning and connection that creates a cultural bond between Africans and the cloth. Borgatti (1983, quoted in Omatseye & Emeriewen 2012:57) affirms that cloth use and cloth metaphors help to define concepts relating to humanity and culture, proper social relations and behaviour.

Fowler's research on the production of Zulu ceramic vessels notes that the full stylistic phenomenon is governed by cultural norms and values as much as by the range of shapes and decorative attributes of the vessels (2008:485). The views expressed by Fowler summarise a strong cultural bond that is present in the choice of aesthetic representation in the production of artefacts in Africa. The shape and colour of items produced by a particular society reflect the cultural and hierarchical notions of that society. For example, the significance of Nguni beadwork is that it indicates a sense of belonging to a particular community group.

3.2. NANDIPHA MNTAMBO AND THE DREAM

The use of the cloth as a metaphor for deep emotional stories about the social dilemmas faced by Nguni women in the modern world has played a major role in the artistic influence of my work. The influence for my dress came from the human forms of sculptural artist Nandipha Mntambo, who uses

her body as sculpture in her art. Her artistic influence on my work comes from the fact that she uses a traditional cloth that is made from cowhide to challenge female stereotypes; in my artwork I use burnt plastic materials to expose the different liminal stages that women go through in order to achieve their prominent identity which is womanhood.

There have been infinite opportunities to challenge the different gender roles present in society. This includes challenging the cultural stereotypes that have been cast upon people to make them act out certain roles rather than giving them the opportunity to be themselves. Mntambo (2009) alludes to this:

Through my art, I investigate and interrogate stereotypical ideals of the female form, as well as notions of femininity. The pains that many women, including myself, have subjected themselves to in order to conform to society-dictated norms have greatly informed my work to date (2009:20)

Although I have never suffered any pain in order to conform to social demands as Mntambo has, my artwork aims to acknowledge the existence of the rite of passage from unmarried woman to married woman and its implications for modern women. For Nguni women, modern life comes with lot of responsibility, which I have chosen to imitate by taking on the “responsibility” of working with unfamiliar materials (burnt plastic) to shape art that has never been produced before. My world was shaped by a woman (my grandmother) who had never experienced life in modern society, and yet she shaped my life as if she knew what the future would hold. When I work on turning materials in a knot I want both to experience the control of shaping and to be controlled by the stereotype of the materials that I use in art making. By so doing, I want to establish the invisible (or visible) influence that the materials and I as the artist shaping them have to come to an agreement that we conforms to each other’s wishes in order to conclude the art work.

My work also “explores aspects of control through the manipulation and

shaping of cowhide into the desired form” (Mntambo 2009:20), but instead of using cowhide, my art work experiment with various materials, shaping them, turning and control their weak structures to make them conform, to create art forms that describe conformity. Modern women cannot control the amount of work that is given to them or expected from them. They are expected to conform to the demands of their husbands’ lives with little or no choice to practice their independence. Also, women are not expected to be in control of their bodies without being constantly checked by their partners to see if their dress code is appropriate for public appearance. Metaphorically speaking, the size of a dress is therefore dictated by society at the expense of a woman’s desire.

It is common knowledge that when Nguni women are working in the fields, they form a choir to sing as symbol of unity. The songs they sing give them the strength to work patiently in harsh weather conditions in the fields or, lately, in the factories. I also witnessed this singing when I was visiting a shoe factory in Pietermaritzburg in August 2011. Mntambo’s artwork *Emabutfo* (Mntambo 2009:20) represents the stage of readiness. In this artwork, she presents an army of female warriors. Although one could say that Mntambo is non-conformist in the material (cowhide) that she chooses to use in her artwork, traces of conformity are also visible in her art. *Emabutfo* (Figure 3.1) and *Silence and dreams* (Figure 3.2) represent unity and conformity. They all face in the same direction, and in the case of *Silence and dreams* (Figure 3.2), they are all inside the kraal-shaped space. The skin tone of the materials used in the sculptures is both light and dark. The structure is static, yet ready for action. One might say it is in a state of readiness, or that readiness has been achieved.



Figure 3.1: Nandipha Mntambo, *Emabutfo* (2009)



Figure 3.2: Nandipha Mntambo, *Silence and dreams* (2009)

Emabutfo represents young girls who have been prepared to enter the next stage, when they will be called *izintombi*, or older girls. During the initiation process for this next stage, the young girls are given a chance to show off their dancing skills, either in groups or individually. The artwork structure conveys the message of pride and a sense of belonging, in the sense that they all act the same and are wearing the same light-coloured cloth. In my art

work, I also used a group of women who dress in the same style.

Mntambo's artwork validates the argument that although she is an independent modern woman, her attitude towards individuality is different from that of Western women. In her artwork she groups her body of art together to remove individuality. The artwork represents unison in all aspects, that is, in form, direction and colour shades. The artwork does not show us individual behaviour, but instead shows social or group unity. In my artwork, the art installation explores the idea of submission to social demands. When a woman is getting married, her individual identity disappears when the cultural rites are performed. One would have expected that Mntambo's attitude towards unity to be presented differently in her artwork to show individual behaviour in her sculptures, based on the fact that she is a young and independent contemporary woman.

Again, Mntambo do not hide the gender of *Amabutfo*. One might have expected her to break away from a masquerading cultural setup such as the kraal in her artwork *Silence and dreams*. One thing that is certain in her artwork is that her attitude and perception of herself in the world does resemble her ancestral background, which her artwork appreciates by using a kraal setting in *Silence and dreams*. The cattle kraal is a sacred area, and cattle represent sacrifices; meat and milk are all connected to living with the spirits (Du Preez 2005:16). In her artwork Mntambo is complying with the requirement to respect the ancestors by promoting silence, which is in line with the interpretation of the initiation practice. The setup of the art installation makes reference to the fact that only family members are allowed to talk to ancestors, other people should be outside and remain quiet.



Figure 3.3: Nandipha Mntambo, *Ukungenisa* (2008)

3.3. NANDIPHA MNTAMBA AND UKUNGENISA

In *Ukungenisa* (Figure 3.3), the artist performs the role of the bullfighter. In order to find the ritual sequence of events, the discussion in this artwork deals with the activities that took place before the artists began the performance. One knows that the artist went into the transition period to construct a new identity, that of a bullfighter. Again, this transition period is a period of conforming to the demands of the bullfighting society. Although the artist challenges societal settings that confine and allocate roles according to gender, one could conclude that there is a period of change that the artist has personally experienced. This position is also the focus of my performance. I

explore the experience of a liminal period, accepting change; allowing myself to be taken to another space by dressing and masquerading into the new role of a married woman. Although the artist challenges the patriarchal setting, she also cannot totally take herself out of her own heritage. For example, in her interview with Buys (2010), Mntambo alludes to the fact that the use of cow hide came from a dream. She says, “I dreamt I saw a large herd of cattle” (Buys 2010:110) and this meant the beginning of her artwork constructed using cowhide. Therefore the significance of the material (cowhide) used by the artist supports earlier assertions that, in Africa there is strong bond between the cloth and cultural heritage. Mntambo admits that “cowhide resonates deeply within” her (Stevenson 2008:58).

She also finds it very strange that although she never lived in the period when cowhide was used to make dresses for women who are getting married, she defies modern norms by working with materials that smell of rot. In this artwork, Mntambo demonstrates that she is a woman worth the recognition of those who lived before her time. By working with and dressing herself in cowhide, the artist reveals to the viewer a strong cultural connectedness to her roots. This artwork presents the artist as a willing participant in her conformity in order to prove to herself that she is a real woman who is able to work in harsh conditions, such as in the studio that smells of rot. In relation to my art performance, the acts of eating, dancing and covering my body with a cloth demonstrate womanhood and show respect for the woman who performed this initiation passage before me.

3.4. MARY SIBANDE AND HER ALTER-EGO SOPHIE

This section explores the work of the 2013 Standard Bank Young Artist Award Winner, Mary Sibande, who illustrates the story of her alter-ego Sophie, a domestic worker. The researcher describes how Sibande “negotiates not only her own ideas, experiences, identities and desires, but

those of others sharing her predicament and emancipatory mission” (Sibande 2013:7). Exploring the construction of identity within post-apartheid South Africa, Sibande's work probes the stereotypical contextualisation of the black female body. Sibande's artworks is discussed in four chronological stages: 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2013. At the end of the discussion one sees how these four stages present different human experiences while exploring the journey of Sophie's changing identity.

The relevance of Sibande's performance stages to my own artwork is that we both deal with the concept of changing identities. In my artwork I address the journey of the wedding process through the installation of a ritual wedding setting. In this setting, the stages of taking a woman to a new family as a bride are staged and performed. The important feature of Sibande's performance that is similar to my artwork is acting and reflecting in absence, where Sophie's eyes are closed in all her performances. The body is with the performance, but soul is not found in her eyes. In my artwork, the body and the soul too are not present in the dress, only a sculptural female form that is left to the imagination of the viewer. Sibande's feature raises the question of why a person would shy away from seeing her beautiful dress.

In order to solicit some meaning from this type of performance, let us draw our attention to three concepts that were discussed earlier: masquerading, the sublime and liminality. For Riviere (1986), masquerading and womanliness could both be assumed and worn as a mask to hide a particular possession that you do not want the world to see, such as masculinity (Riviere 1986:38). Although Sophie does not necessarily hide her gender, we can allude to the second theory of sublime in this case. In Sophie's performance there are signs of a particular experience of being moved by a particular event and that impacts the self (Ryan 2001:265). The power of the sublime, therefore, has allowed Sophie to enter a period of transformation

that is liminality with resistance. It is for this reason that many commentators write about Sibande's "alter-ego" Sophie when describing her art installation. This is in line with Ryan's (2001) assertion that the outcome of the sublime in the inferior effects is admiration, esteem, ego, reverence, devotion and respect (2001:52). Although our two art concepts have similar features (closed eyes), as discussed earlier, the meaning of closed eyes with a traditional wedding veil as portrayed in my artwork is different to that of Sibande's alter-ego, Sophie. In my case, the closing of eyes with a traditional veil represents a transition or transformation period. Again, it is metaphor for submission, where the bride submits her remaining self to the initiation process.

As indicated earlier, I approach Sibande's work in chronological order, and begin the interpretation of Sophie by describing the relevance of her art performance from 2009. It starts with Sophie entering the scene as *Sophie – Ntombikayise* (2009), as well as *I'm a lady* (2009) (Figure 3.4). Sophie's performance represents reflection, a conversation with the self. In this artwork, Sophie enters the scene with a purple dress overlaid with royal blue. On top of the dress she confidently puts on her domestic apron and head gear. In this case she does not mind showing the viewer that the roots of this lady originate from domestic labour. Taking into consideration that most educated children of domestic workers would not like to show this side of their life, it is not surprising that her *alter-ego* is responsible for her source of identity. For Sophie, the apron put food on the table, and she has no regrets about her past. This art performance stage represents a reflection on the experience that the artist has to encounter in order to find a breakthrough in her dreams. The artist seems to have experienced some level of disappointment, as she acknowledges in her artwork, *They don't make them like they used to* (2009) (Figure 3.5).



Figure 3.4: Mary Sibande, *I am a Lady* (2009)



Figure 3.5: Mary Sibande, *They don't make them like they used to* (2009).



Figure 3.6: Mary Sibande, *The wait seems to go forever* (2009)



Figure 3.7: Mary Sibande, *Caught in the rapture* (2009)

The artist is knitting a Spiderman costume and in the middle of doing it, she acknowledges changes she is making. The third artwork, too, expresses disappointment, as it looks like she has been waiting more than long enough, *The wait seems to go forever* (2009) (Figure 3.6). In this artwork, there are two symbolic features that the artist uses to express her desires. The first symbol is a bus stop, which represents the stage of transition or change. The second symbol is the chandelier, which symbolises a passion for the good life and fine things.

The fourth artwork that expresses unhappiness is *Caught in the rapture* (2009) (Figure 3.7). This is a very interesting artwork when one looks at the history of Sophie's difficult life of waiting and finding things that are not made the way they used to be. The title of this artwork has an interesting angle which the researcher used to interpret the artist's life world. According to the title, the artist is trapped in the rapture and she does not appreciate this experience. Although the artist has been waiting, things do not seem to be getting better. Who would have thought that the one who pursues happiness will be trapped by the very same thing that she has been longing for? The spider web in the artwork is a metaphor for enticement into a trap. The artist realises that the rapture has tempted her into a web trap. In my artwork, this is situated in relation to the whole concept of marriage. The experience of being caught in a marriage web is represented in my artwork *Umphelandaba*

The final artwork by Sibande to be discussed in this first phase is *I put a spell on me* (2009) (Figure 3.8). The researcher pays attention on two symbolic items in this artwork. The first is a symbol of religion in her dress code. When things are tough, the artist has not lost faith in her traditional religious background. What is so interesting to note about this artwork in relation to religion is the second symbolic item, which represents the love of fine things, a Louis Vuitton Stick in her hand. This artwork represents a hybrid of two areas, traditional (Zion dress code) meets modern life (Louis Vuitton stick). In other words, even though the artist may come from a Zionist church background that does not stop her from loving fine things. In relation to my art



Figure 3.8: Mary Sibande, *I put a spell on me* (2009)



Figure 3.9: Mary Sibande, *Her Majesty Queen Sophie* (2010)

performance, the artworks present two sets of lives that the bride has to deal with that is, the requirements of traditional life and modern life. This concludes the first phase of discussing the life world of Sophie using her own terms. Now, let us enter the second phase of Sophie's experience to see what is happening.

The second phase (2010) has very different take on Sophie's life. This time Sophie seems to have removed the spell referred to in the previous artwork and she is progressing with the redefinition of her identity. *Her Majesty Queen Sophie* (2010) (Figure 3.9) sets the scene for what to expect from Sophie's life experience. This time, there is no more crying about the past, Sophie is finally taking her place in the royal office. Her dress in *Silent symphony* (2010) tells the story of a free spirit. It is spreading freely as she takes the lead in conducting choral music, which is normally enjoyed by rich people, kings and queens. Sophie reigns and her waiting is over. The accessories are becoming more detailed and sophisticated, as can be seen in *Her Majesty Queen Sophie* (2010). This is in line with her dreams. Therefore, researcher notes that the period of 2010 in Sophie's life was when her dream came true as she progresses her life to the royal space.

In 2011, opulence continued to be present in Sophie's life. Possessing luxury goods becomes normal. In the artwork *of Prosperity* (2011) (Figure 3.10), Sophie shows her new shopping habits with a massive acquisition of goods. At this point, for the first time, Sophie appears without an apron in the piece she calls *Living memory* (2011). She notes that she is actually a living memory of her own life experience. This time she appears as a soldier, a fighter, protector and conqueror. Now Sophie the hybrid, Sophie the domestic worker and Sophie the soldier are dancing like *Lovers in tango* (2011). This time, Sophie has time to dance and reflect on her own story because *everything is not lost* (2011).



Figure 3.10: Mary Sibande, *of Prosperity* (2011)

In 2013 something terrible is born: *A terrible beauty is born* (2013 “we observe this shift in *A terrible beauty is born* where Sophie’s white apron and bonnet, both markers of domestic servitude, are being undressed or stripped off by the creatures she is giving birth to” (Sibande 2013:26). There is a change of garment; the colour purple takes a dominant part.



Figure 3.11: Mary Sibande, *A non-winged ceiling being* (2013)

For the first time, the apron and bonnet are taken down. Strange new creatures are being given life to occupy the space. They are shapeless and they have been given a name by the artist; they are known only as *A non-winged ceiling being* (2013). It may be true that the artist is entering into a new phase in her life. “The new Sophie is somewhat apprehensive if not intense in the ways in which she appears to be ensconced in a state of transition”, confirms Sibande (2013:26). Note the confusion in the space that surrounds Sophie.

“Perhaps she is in some kind of trance and wrestling with her transfiguration in the dreamland that is most possible through her own imagination as a dreamer”, says Sibande (2013:26). It is also true that one may have no control over the environment that determines the future. Sophie might be entering a space of uncertainty and she has no control over the unknown future brought about by the desire for change, growth or maturing (Sibande 2013:26). In this phase of her experience of the life world, Sophie meets the life that cannot be identified, but she is experiencing it all the same and this is confirmed by the new creatures that are part of her new identity. It may even be correct to say a new Sophie identity is born. As Njami (2007) notes:

Identity could be defined in terms of one's sense of being in the world. Indeed, this is the usual approach to it. Yet identity does not just refer to the individual. Identity cards may well give our names, forenames and distinctive features, but they are used less to say who we are than where we come from. This type of identity refers to a sameness, an identification with whole of which we are one elements – a nation. It is in this concept that was integral to the construction of modern African nations emerging from the turmoil of the 20th century. Hence the obvious – today's Africa is the fruit of a history altered by others. It is impossible to separate the construct of Africanness from its historical context, impossible for Africans to have been able to think of themselves in any other way than as a recreation to others – in this case the colonisers (2007:63).

As Njami points out, this phase in Sophie's life does not reveal anything that relates to historical context. What I can confirm in Njami's statement is that Sophie defines her new identity in the world by exerting her presence through her choice of the art materials and subject matter. In this case, her identity has moved from a lady to a mother who is able to give birth. It is for this reason that we expect her to provide names for her creatures, like a mother would give names to her children. The construction of an identity compatible with the aspirations of the young African nations illustrates the challenges that the continent, and the creators within it, had to face (Njami 2007:62). In other words, Sibande is reflecting on her desire to challenge the colonisation of women's identity by having to serve the colonial masters as domestic workers without dreams of their own. The creatures may represent the liminal period of leaving the past behind and entering into a new era.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRACTICAL ARTWORK AND MEDIA

This chapter provides an analysis and interpretation of the visual narratives emanating from this study's data collection methods. These visual metaphors are presented through an installation of soft sculpture and other materials which were found to add value by communicating the meaning and messages they carry as well as a video installation of performance by the researcher/artist.

4.1. INTANDO YENDLAKUDLA– LOVE PORTION

Intando yendlakudla (Figure 4.1) is a performance that re-enacts the real ritual of *ukwamukela umakoti*, or the bride's acceptance by the groom's family. The definition of *Intando yendlakudla* refers to the process of giving someone a love portion, love magic charm or love spell so that that person no longer wants to see or love any other man or woman apart from the one she is married to. The love potion is normally mixed with food. The art performance is a metaphor for the dispossession of self, property or image (identity). Covering the body with blanket in this performance is in line with *Dorothy Cross and the art of dispossession*, as described by Lydenberg (2005:25).



Figure 4.1: Bongani Ntombela, *Intando yendlakudla* (2015). Photograph.

The concept of dispossession in this performance is presented as “an entry point through which to develop a critique of the sovereign subject”, which is the Nguni culture (Gambetti 2014:255). This art installation provides clues as to how one conforms to the sovereignty of culture. According to Singel (2006:358):

Cultural sovereignty refers to tribes' efforts to represent their histories and existence using their own terms, and it acknowledges that each Indian nation has its own vision of self-determination as shaped by each tribe's culture, history, territory, traditions, and practices.

For example, Maxwell (2014) discusses how fashion, particularly uniforms, was used in Europe as a symbol of sovereignty and as a political tool to promote nationalism. “If the ability to introduce a national uniform represents political sovereignty, our interest and honour are united in recommending a

national dress” asserts Maxwell (2014:98-99). Therefore, the art installation represents the sovereignty of cultural construction appearing in the form of “space” (Ran 2009:8). For Ran (2009:9), some cultures experience “space” primarily as a visual field; as a sound; or as a tactile or kinaesthetic construct and experience. The concept allows for a critique of the limit of the “liberal construal of the self as the owner not only of property and entitlements but also of its own body, identity, rights, and freedom” (Gambetti 2014:255). In other words, *Intando yendlakudla* presents a journey showing how the liberal concept of self-control is exhausted in favour of cultural conformity. In this cultural rite, the bride is introduced to the groom’s family by being given food. It is a symbol of them accepting the bride into the groom’s family. This process allows the bride to have her own place and her own dishes in the family when dining. It also allows the bride to enter the groom’s kitchen and make food for the family. During this period, the members of the groom’s family watch how the bride eats to see whether she is a wild eater or a sluggish eater, and critique her eating habits. Riley (2007:800), admits that:

Individual autonomy is its critical core, but pluralism remains a prominent tenet. This means that liberalism must navigate the sometimes treacherous course between upholding individual rights and accommodating a diverse array of cultures and organizations. Liberalism is challenged by this endeavor, particularly when individual rights are exercised in communities that espouse illiberal conceptions of the good.

The performance is “real”, as Krueger puts it when describing the Theatre of Brett Bailey: “Bailey is not only speaking about something being done, he is also doing it by saying it, complying with J.L. Austin’s criteria of performativity” (Krueger 2010:235). As discussed in chapter one, the researcher decided to use the concept of masquerading to re-enact the ritual in this performance. It was not done to ridicule the practice or the practitioner, but rather to acknowledge their commitment to the “liminal period” (de Villiers 2006:153). The concept of dispossession is in line with the definition of liminality introduced earlier. According to de Villiers, the liminal period defines the next

stage of identity in a person's life:

A liminal period in a person's life means the crossing of a threshold or margin, a movement of an individual from one mental/physical state of being to another. This transition may take the form of a public or private rite or a death/life ritual. Since identity is based on experiences, challenge to identity comes via voluntary or involuntary exposure to certain sensations to emerge transformed (de Villiers 2006:153).

The significance of this traditional liminal process is that it authenticates the acceptance of the bride by her new family. Heeren et al. (2011) explain that the tradition must be adhered to and accepted, regardless of the bride's educational background and she will have to follow the practice as required by her culture and that of the groom so that the marriage will be recognised by her family and community (2011:74).

We noted previously how in Sibande's performance, Sophie follows the same process of "transition" that de Villiers refers to. In this performance, Sophie transformed herself from a lady (*I am a lady* 2009) to a sophisticated queen (*Her Majesty Queen Sophie* 2011). The performance in *Intando yendlakudla*, follows the same approach. The process covers the period of switching from a single individual to (married) womanhood. The pertinent cultural issue of the rite of passage is addressed through the art performance as a "stylistic phenomenon that is created and experienced" (Crowther 2012:3). In this performance, *Intando yendlakudla*, the performer goes through the process of transition in lived experience by reacting to eating the portion of the meat prescribed by the cultural rite. When describing selves in transition, Schouten (1991), says:

One characteristic that makes humans unique among living creatures is our ability to examine ourselves, to find ourselves lacking, and to attempt self-betterment. This sense of incompleteness drives us not merely to create, but also self-create, and we consume goods and services in the process. (1991:412)

Finally, this transition period through the cultural rite-of-passage provides the participant with an opportunity to distinguish herself as an “individual as member of the humankind, self as locus of experience, and person as agent-in-society” (Harris 1989:599).

4.2. UNGABHEK’EMVA

The next setting is the preparation of the bride who is about to leave her family home, and the traditional ritual takes place in the ancestors’ space, called the kraal. The artwork that was influenced by the female form of Nandipha Mntambo is *Ungabhek’emva* (Figure 4.2), which means “do not look back”. This is a very important ritual that takes place before the bride leaves her family home. Her father takes her to the family kraal to ask the ancestors to look after her. She is then advised to leave the kraal without looking back. Her not looking back symbolises that she is no longer part of her family, hence the name of the art installation. The major influence of this art installation comes from the beautiful sculptures of *Emabufto* (2009) that are moulded from cow hide into sensuous female forms. The metaphor of the burnt materials represents liminal period, the dying and rediscovery of the self. The parents of the bride telling her, in front of the audience, that she is no longer part of her original family is a transitional process that is hard to explain. The bride could hear her father disown his daughter and wish her luck in her new family. In this cultural ritual, the bride is allowed to cry and bid farewell to her brothers and sisters. The journey between her family home and her new one is a lonely journey because she belongs nowhere, as she will only go through the welcoming process when she reaches the groom’s yard.

In both artworks, Mntambo and I use the female body to construct moulded female forms into sculptures. The female forms in both artworks, *Emabufto* (2009) and *Ungabhek’emva* (2014), are empty and void. The metaphor of

emptiness represents the disappearance of self. When the bride goes through the different stages of the initiation, she submits herself fully to the process. Again, the metaphor of emptiness represents silence and the end of her past life. The bride will have to adopt a new language, a new culture and a new dress code. Both artworks present the viewer with empty female forms that exist only for admiration and adoration. As Zakes Mda puts in his book, *Sometimes there is void*: “human life, that is, for other forms are always here even after we have left” (Mda 2011:1). Mda’s words could not have said it better. In Mntambo’s case, the artist left her body form in the artwork to thrive long after she has left. Again, *Ungabhek’emva* is a reflection of the beauty that has occupied the dress and then left soon afterwards. Thus the focus is on the dress and on how the meaning of the beauty is presented. In Mntambo’s artwork we discuss the sensual female form as if the original living form is still present, yet we reflect absence. The concept of *reflecting absence* in the presence is also noted in the memorial museum in the US, which proposes a “space that resonates with the feelings of loss and absence” that were generated by the destruction of the World Trade Center (Arad & Walker 2004).



Figure 4.2: Bongani Ntombela, *Ungabhek'emva 1 (The Kraal)* (2015)



Figure 4.3: Bongani Ntombela, *Ungabhek'emva 2 (The bride in the Kraal Close up)* (2015)

Both *Emabufto* and *Ungabhek'emva* deal with the idea of presence and vanity. In defining vanity I will borrow the words of Mullins (2003) in *All is vanity*, where he says that vanity is literally breath and that it is synonymous with empty, worthless and deceitful (2003:24). The human body came during the creation of the artwork and then left, leaving behind its *breath* in the sculpture. The sculpture invites the viewer to search in his/her imagination for the female form that was present during the creation of the artwork, and yet admire the empty space without the body. Both artworks use the space of the kraal to reflect its meaning. In Mntambo's artwork *Silence and dreams*, the sculptures create a cylindrical shape to re-create the shape of a kraal. The name of the artwork, *Silence and dreams*, is a sign of respecting the ancestor's sacred place, the kraal. This is referred back through Mntambo's indication earlier that her artwork was conceived through a dream, which is

associated with ancestors, and the ancestors' place in our culture is the kraal. My artwork uses the setting of a kraal to erect the art installation. During this ritual, only the bride and the bride's family are allowed to enter the kraal; guests and bridesmaids remain outside. In my artwork, bridesmaids remain outside, surrounding the kraal as spectators at her father's place and yet in the groom's kraal they anticipate their time to take over the baton. Hlobo (2006) refers to this practice when he describes his artwork *Umthubi* (2006), saying that the kraal is a space where, firstly, cows are kept, and secondly, certain rituals take place, and that women are not allowed to freely enter the kraal unless they are daughters of the family (Hlobo 2006).

The difference between my artwork and Mntambo's is in the type of materials used in the construction of the sculptural female forms. Mntambo uses "culminating, ghostly cowhide cloaks" to construct her sculptures (Buys 2010:107), whereas my artwork is dominated by found plastic materials, which Crowther (2012) calls "ready-made" (2012:175). The similarity in our artworks, though, is that we both use found materials. Mntambo uses found cowhide materials and I use found plastic materials. Found materials are not new in the construction of modern art. Crowther cites two prominent artists, Georges Braque (1882-1963) and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) who used materials such as newspaper, rope and lino to make their *papier colle* and collages (Crowther 2012:172). In my artwork, the use of burnt plastic has "conceptual phenomena" (Crowther 2012:175) in the sense that it represents the "liminal period" described earlier (de Villiers 2006:153).

The materials used in the sculpture also went through a transition period; dying through fire and yet reconstructed in its new identity as a dress. Notably, most women go through a difficult transition period of repeated jogging, running and fasting in the process of burning fat in their bodies in order to reconstruct them to fit perfectly into their wedding dresses. Smith

(1994) confirms that individuals modify their biographical presentations in order to produce self-enhancing personal accounts, and suggests that cognitive, motivational and rhetorical factors all play a part in this process (1994:371). One may adore the shape of the dress, but not be able to imagine the pain and suffering that the person wearing the dress went through in order to receive compliments, such as on her wedding day.

The concept of using female forms and fashion statements is in line with the aspirations of the modern world. In general, clothes making is synonymous with women. Barber (1994) puts it more bluntly in her book *Women's work* (1994:127), stating that “clothes make the man, but women make the clothes”. The strong relationship between women and clothing transition also comes from the fact that women are child bearers and are the first to dress their children as part of their role as mother. The role of weaving and sewing, which is mostly associated with women, makes more sense when one considers that it is “compatible with simultaneous child watching” (Barber 1994:29). It is not simply a coincidence that women can never be divorced from fashion; in fact, after the birth of their children, women are forever combining colours, choosing comfortable fabrics and making sure that the child is dressed warmly and suitably. As a result, one may not question the origin of “finish and skill in terms of compositional criteria” (Crowther 2012:5) when one refers to all of Sibande’s artwork dresses.

The difference between my art and that of Mntambo is in the conceptual framework. Mntambo challenges the culture of “paying *lobola*” (Buys 2010:107) for the bride, whereas I acknowledge the experience that other women like my wife go through in order to be accepted as part of the groom’s family and community.

My artwork honours the significant role played by my wife in my family, while

at the same time celebrating her new identity. Thus the extravagance, the elegance and the fashions in my artwork explore women's desire for beauty. The elegantly dressed women in my artwork represent the "aesthetic experience" I discussed earlier, as the body and soul of a woman in her truest sense, which represents a woman's moral duty to play her role without fear or shame.



Figure 4.4: Bongani Ntombela, *Ungabhek'emva* (3) (*the bridesmaids*) (2015)

4.3. EMPHELANDABA

The next artwork is a setting that consists of two art installations in one place. The name of this setting is *Umphelelandaba*, which means "the last destination". In other words, this is the space in which all matters concerning

the family are resolved and finalised. The artwork includes a kist (Figure 4.6 and 4.7) and a big knot on a double bed (Figure 4.5). A double bed represents sharing and commitment to one another. As explained in chapter one, the wedding kist is the most important part of the Nguni wedding ritual. The wedding kist normally contains the new clothes, gifts and cutlery that the bride will be using in her new family. This artwork is a metaphor for inheritance. In Nguni culture, the content and size of the wedding kist defines the type of bride that the groom's family will be welcoming.

The double bed is also a metaphor for submission. The two people that use the bed submit to one another. The submission process is a case where the bride can both win and lose. She can win in the sense that, culturally, a bride can win her husband by giving him his *indlalifa* (replica), or son. I can attest to this concept through the experience of my own wife. Her wish was to have a son. No pressure was exerted on her by any member of my family; the desire came to her naturally. Unfortunately, she gave birth to two beautiful daughters. Going back to the idea of winning and losing, the bedroom space can also become a place where a woman loses her self-esteem, especially if she is unable to bear children (for health reasons).

The BIG KNOT represents the binding together of two individuals for life. As a woman, whether traditional or modern, you are expected to abide by the instructions of your marriage. Again, the knot symbolises a commitment to keeping your bedroom matters a closely-guarded secret. Whatever comes out of the bedroom, the truth will largely remain the woman's secret. In Zulu, there is saying: "*ingane yaziwa ngunina*", which means that the only person



Figure 4.5: Bongani Ntombela, Umphelandaba 1 (the bed) (2015)

who truly knows the father of a child is the mother. The bedroom setting also represents a space where the dirt is hidden. The dirty knot represents the good and bad secrets of a family. It does not matter what your status is in life, rich or poor, the truth of whether your husband is good or bad cannot be kept secret anymore; the truth of whether a woman is a virgin or not is revealed in this space. Various items in the space represent various tools that are used to build a strong home. Elegant bedding represents the masquerading of the bedroom to paint a portrait of a good life, despite the presence of challenges.

There are many beautifully made beds that can tell stories very different to what they seem to show. These stories include domestic abuse, infidelity, lies and many others. This art installation provides insight into the battles that have taken place, such that some unconventional elements find their way to the bedroom. The installation includes elements such as a knife, representing defence; condoms next to a drivers' license, representing permission to drive each other sexually in bed; glue as a metaphor for bonding; a Bible, which symbolises spiritual commitment; and building tools, such as drills, which represent the building of a new foundation as in Figure 4.8. Some have had their bedrooms bewitched by *omakhwapheni* (girlfriends), hence they seek protection from bad luck through the injection of *umuthi* using a bulb syringe. You are not supposed to leave this space alive. If you do, it will be through divorce. Otherwise, "*uyophuma ngebhokisi*" – you will only leave in a coffin.

The art installation presented in this space provides an opportunity for one to explore the meaning of traditional ritual practice and rites of passage that are unavoidable for one to rediscover her identity. This installation is the masquerading of the real life as it happens. There is no rehearsal, the actors are part of the life and their revolving identity is located in this space.



Figure 4.6: Bongani Ntombela, *Umpelandaba 2 (the kist)* (2015,



Figure 4.7: Bongani Ntombela, *Umpelandaba 3 (Kist contents close up)* (2015

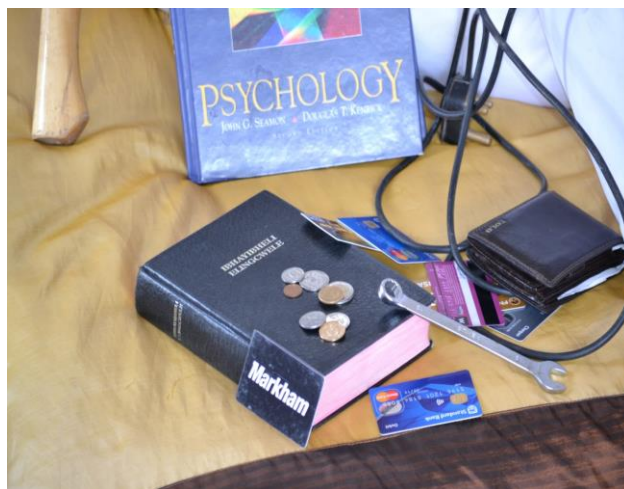


Figure 4.8: Bongani Ntombela, *Umphelandaba 4* (Kist contents close up) (2015,

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

This research references theories from a number of African writers, including Aidoo (1986), Kalawole (1997), Sofola (1998), Chukukere (1998) and Hudson-Weems (1998), in order to understand the meaning of conformity from the African feminist point of view. The findings of this research are that the African cultural “tendency to make one’s actions comply with prevailing norms, irrespective of one’s personal beliefs” (Scott and Marshall 2005:33) is more complex than the theories from the Western world. In the African tradition, submission to the marriage ritual is one of the tools for creating social cohesion, whereas in Western culture marriage is an agreement between two people. This alone creates huge ideological differences amongst Western and African writers. Arndt concedes that the worldview definition of feminism, for example, should be “modified and contextualised within each given society to which it applies, since the nature of official discrimination within family structures and discrimination of gender conception is defined differently for each given African society” (Arndt 2002:72). In this research, it was noted that there are a number of important women writers who spent their lives dealing with women’s issues but denied being feminists at various times, including Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, Mirriama Ba and Buchi Emecheta. Therefore, defining conformity from a linear literary point of view does not allow those in the Western world to understand why African woman conform to what looks to the outsider’s eye like patriarchal cultural practices. Chukukere confirms this view when she asserts that “womanism is not antagonistic to Nigerian men, but recognizes communality of struggle with them to overthrow imperialism” (Chukukere 1998:138).

5.1. AFRICAN CONCEPTS

This research also notes that a number of African concepts, like *Ubuntu*, and womanism are responsible for the creation and maintenance of social bonds

that are uniquely African. Thio (1995:39) identifies four main ways in which individuals bond themselves to society, firstly, attachment to conventional people and institutions; secondly, commitment to conformity; thirdly, involvement in conventional activities; and lastly, belief in the moral validity of social rules.

5.1.1. Africanness

Isihlonipho is one of those uniquely African concepts that cannot be easily defined. While Nguni women are expected to conform to the principles of *isihlonipho*, it is a sign of respect rather due to generic conformity. But *Isihlonipho* is not only a sign of respect, it is also the “expression of Zuluness”, or Africanness (Rudwick & Shange 2006:473). In his thesis ‘*Ukuhlonipha kwamaXhosa*’, Sakhiwo Bongela describes the concept as a customary practice designed to instil discipline and respect in members of a society (Bongela 2001:10). *Isihlonipho* forms part of the complex Africanness roots that connect us as Africans, and in which we find the reason to celebrate our diverse heritage in harmony. Kolawole (1997:5) argues that diversity is central to the “dualities, paradoxes and simultaneous existence of values in African philosophy”. In other words, different cultural views do not deny African women the opportunity to live side by side in harmony.

5.1.2. African womanism

For many African people, Western philosophy is not to be trusted since it was responsible for introducing colonial oppression. Whatever was “central and relevant in the traditional African socio-political domain” was invaded by “male-centered and male-dominate European and Arab cultures”, and as a result, she argues, African women suffer even more (Sofola 1998:53). This background is the reason that gendered activism cannot be adopted in African as it has been in the Western world.

5.1.3. African ethics

Relatedness is a decisive issue that cannot be categorised as biological since its significance goes beyond the visible community to include the invisible community of the ancestors (Bujo 2001:19-21). Murove (2009:28) states that “African ethics arises from an understanding of the world as an interconnected whole whereby what it means to be ethical is inseparable from all spheres of existence”. The African concept of community arises from the bonded network of life that embraces fellowship within the community to commemorate members of the community that existed in the past and to prepare the community to nurture future generations (Murove 2009:29). The origins of the African concept of ethics can be found in community songs and storytelling; the concept is embodied in traditional African customs and institutions and forms part of the whole ethos and lifestyle of the community or village (Shutte 2009:85). Therefore, separating women and defining their struggle outside of the African context is a recipe for confusion since this context is part of the very identity that defines what it means to be African.

5.1.4. African women artists and their experience

Mntambo and Sibande’s art performance shared the light on how these express through art the contemporary development of their identity in an ever-changing environment. What is clear from their performance is that masquerading and hybrid life is what they experience in their life world. For an example, Mntambo re-enacts the sport of bull fighting using art performance in order to experience how it feels to be a woman in the ring. In this performance, the focus is on her more than anything else. The performance is about her experience and that is why in her interview she talks about herself in the ring. The lesson learnt from Mntambo’s performance is that most situations have transition period. In the case of Mntambo, we note how she prepares herself by wearing cowhide and carrying the red flag including the manner in which she waves it. For Mntambo to be called a

bullfighter, she has to wear like one. One could conclude that the artist did not see herself as a bullfighter if she does not carry the red flag. The research notes the preparation to enter the bullfighting ring by the artist and liken it to a ritual that artist compelled herself to participate in order to achieve to be called a bull fighter. The preparation that takes place before the marriage is a ritual that a woman enters willingly. She understands that after that process she will not be called an unmarried woman anymore. Therefore, conformity is not a stand-alone act of compliance that could be easily defined without the presence of the context in which it occurs. Again in my artwork, conformity is intertwined in the transition as it cannot be separated as a single entity. The performance in my artwork describes the interconnectedness that includes a number of traditional rituals such as reporting to ancestors and transition from unmarried to being a married woman. One may conclude by saying the art performance has achieved its objective of enacting the environment in which cultural practice is described in its context.

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